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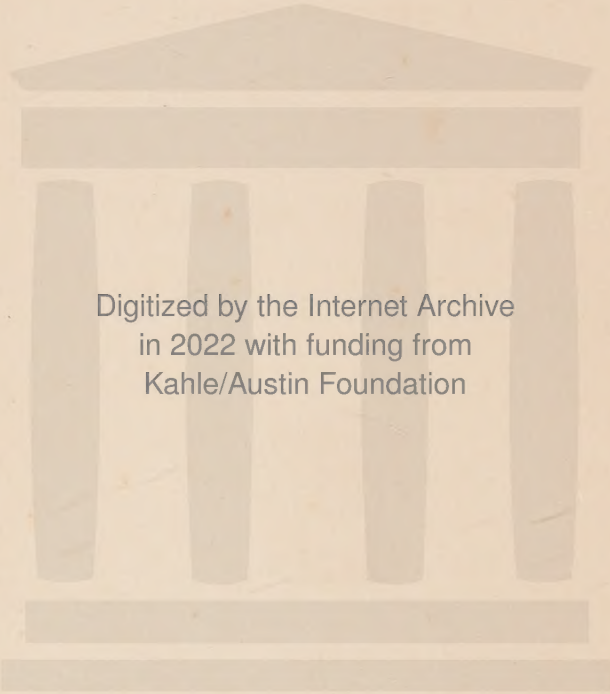
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JOHN STANDON OF TEXAS



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# John Standon of Texas

A WESTERN STORY

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY



CHELSEA HOUSE

79 SEVENTH AVENUE

NEW YORK CITY

John Standon of Texas

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# JOHN STANDON OF TEXAS

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## CHAPTER I

### ONLY HIMSELF TO BLAME

**E**VEN the conductor of the train that crawled into the town with spasmodic jerks, like a spent swimmer calling upon his last bit of energy to reach the shore, had a worried look. John Standon had noted that particularly. The conductors, as a rule, were blasé to an extreme, and scarcely anything seemed to touch their emotions. Yet this conductor was worried; that much was evident. Standon wondered about it a bit at first, and then called himself an utter ass for having done so. If the conductor was worried at all, it probably was about his job, which was an uncertain one under existing conditions, else at the possibility of a new arrival in his home, a new addition to a family already hard to feed and clothe, also because of existing conditions.

But when he left the train with the pack on his back, and walked up the street away from the station, John Standon noticed other things that were significant. The peons, for instance, seemed to lack their usual courtesy, and, furthermore, they showed disrespect openly, which is something a peon will not do unless he is filled with the false courage that comes from excited argument.

Standon's eyes narrowed a trifle, but he held his head high and pretended not to notice, which was proper for an Americano with dignity of a sort. Now and then a man failed to make haste to get out of his way, here and there one snarled at him; once a fellow looked straight at John Standon and then turned away and spat deliberately on the walk. Still Standon did not take these things to himself.

For more than a year he had been away from Chihuahua, far to the south in the mountains looking for an elusive vein of gold that refused to be discovered. He was out of touch with things political in a town where politics may change overnight, and often have. These subdued insults were not for him personally, he knew. They were for what he represented, the better class, the Americans, men who might be supposed to take sides against any heterogeneous mob seeking to cause the overthrow of constituted government.

Standon took no part in Mexican quarrels. All that he had asked of Mexico was a rich mining claim, and he had failed to find that. Now he was in Chihuahua again. A few miles to the north was Texas, and Standon glowed when he thought of it. In Texas was an uncle who owned countless broad acres and thousands of cattle; and he would welcome John Standon with open arms and give him a half interest if John would marry and settle down, since John and his uncle were the only Standons remaining. Settling down was all that worried Standon; he had no "settling up" to do, either monetary or personal.

Now, with his big pack on his back, he walked rapidly through the streets toward the little *posada* where he had put up often before; a little inn in a quiet side street, where the food was excellent and the tariff not high. He might have continued to the States, but the long journey on uncertain trains had tired him; and in Chihuahua was a man who owed him money and would pay. Standon had a reluctance to approach his uncle penniless. The man who owed him money was but a means to an end; fate moves in peculiar ways.

As he hurried along the street, neither too fast nor too slow, but with just the proper degree of speed to get him to his destination without it appearing that he was frightened and in a hurry, Standon continued observing the signs of coming trouble.

Agitators had been at work, he supposed, and there would be another revolution. And after that there would be another, and yet another. Well, Standon did not care about it! He had no interest in Mexican politics. He would remain in Chihuahua the night, find his man in the morning, and in the afternoon leave for Texas and a decent future.

But his Texas blood began boiling before he had gone far. Evil-faced peons leered at him as he passed. Several times a man got in his way deliberately. Standon's eyes flashed now and then, and he bit his lip in an effort to control his rising temper. He regretted that his revolver was in the pack on his back instead of in a holster at his hip.

Standon adjusted the pack as he walked, so that his arms could swing free in case of an emergency.

Into his face came the expression that Mexican peons, and Mexicans of better station in life, have learned to fear when seen in the countenance of a Texan.

John Standon was a son of whom his native State could be proud. He stood over six feet, his shoulders were broad and his hips lean, and his arms were well muscled.

Standon was a fighting man, and not without experience. All his life he had fought; against boys when he was a boy, against cattle rustlers when he grew older, with the Americans who had tried to make the border safe. He had fought, also, against the mountains and their turbulent streams, the deep forests, wild animals, cold nights, fogs and blizzards and intense heat, the desert, the thousand and one menaces with which nature guards her treasures so that only the intrepid may claim them.

Now he asked nothing but respect and peace, yet he was ready for trouble. He turned into a side street, still noting the manifestations of disrespect on every side. It puzzled him, but he told himself that he would find the solution soon.

Ahead of him the walk was jammed with men who were listening to one of their ilk give a tirade against the existing government. John Standon saw that he could not get through unless some of them moved. The gutter was vile, and it was unthinkable that an American would allow himself to be forced to walk into it.

Standon stopped at the edge of the crowd. He knew that these men were aware of his presence, yet none made a move to give him passage room, as they



would have done ordinarily. Shoulders were shrugged here and there, though no man turned to face him, and Standon heard a few low chuckles.

The blood flowed hot through his veins, and anger surged within him. This was something that could not be endured, notwithstanding what happened afterward. A real man could not keep his respect if he allowed the affront.

"One side!" Standon cried, suddenly, in a stentorian voice that often had fought against roaring mountain streams or sent a hail across a wide waste of desert country.

The speaker continued, and no man made a move. Standon saw grins on the faces of those farthest from him. Suddenly he launched himself forward, grasped the nearest man and flung him into the filthy gutter. He seized two others, crashed their heads together, and sent them after the first.

Then he was among them like a raging typhoon, showering his blows, giving them not the slightest chance to resist, allowing them no quarter. He got his back against the wall of the building, and so he faced them. Had they been able to get behind him, disaster might have been his portion, but John Standon knew better than to allow such a thing.

They broke before him and fled. He stood with his back against the wall and his clenched fists at his sides, waiting for them to renew the combat, eying them until they fled from his gaze.

Some crossed the street, growling and hissing at him. Others went on down the walk, swaggering a bit as though they had defined an enemy. Standon

stood for another minute, watching them, and then he shrugged his shoulders, shifted his pack, and continued toward the little hotel.

It was almost dusk now, and a cold mist had descended upon the city. It was one of those peculiar mists that rolled down from the distant hills and chilled men to the bone, dirty weather such as makes men mad for a time.

Standon quickened his stride, watching carefully on every side lest one of his recent enemies contemp'ate a foul attack and catch him off guard. He reached his destination, and stooped to enter the narrow door. There was nobody in the office or the little lobby, and loud voices from a room in the rear told Standon that the landlord was enjoying a quarrel with the cook.

Standon flung the pack into a rickety chair and stretched his arms and eased his shoulders. A door banged, and the fat landlord hurried toward him, stopping on the way to light a lamp. He looked up, adjusted his spectacles, and blinked his eyes.

"Eh?" he cried. "Señor Standon! It is really you, señor? It has been a long time since you honored my poor hostelry."

"About a year, señor," Standon replied.

"As big and tall as ever, eh? And the picture of health. It is good that you looked in to see me, señor. I am proud to have a sight of you again."

"I would have arrived this morning, but the train from the south crawled like a snail," Standon explained. "Therefore, I am tired. The best room on

your second floor, señor, some hot water with which to wash, and some food. I am very hungry."

"You—that is, you intend to remain here?" the landlord asked, a peculiar expression coming into his face.

"Do you think that I intend to sleep in the street in this confounded fog and mist? Are you afraid I cannot pay?" Standon cried.

"Nothing of the sort! The señor always has paid, and did he not have a single peso his credit would be good with me. But——"

"Are we to remain standing here all night speaking about it?" Standon demanded. "I have said that I am tired, dirty, and hungry. Is this an inn or a debating society?"

"I—that is, I have a room, of course," the landlord replied.

John Standon had been watching his host, and he knew that there was something in the air more than the odor of garbage that came from the kitchen. And he knew, also, that the way to get at the truth would be to pretend he wished to hear nothing.

The landlord picked up the heavy pack, beneath which he staggered, and led the way toward the narrow, rickety stairs where the cobwebs filled the corners. Standon could have carried the pack easily with one hand, but he would have lowered himself in the estimation of the fat landlord if he had done so, and he knew it.

Up the stairs they went, and along a dark hallway. The landlord opened the door of a room, and stepped aside for Standon to enter. He followed, made a

light, and glanced rapidly around the room. Then he stood aside as though waiting orders, scratching at his head like a puzzled man, wanting to speak and not knowing exactly how to begin.

Standon inspected the room carefully, as he always did strange quarters. There was a door opening upon a narrow balcony, and two windows on the street side. Standon went upon the balcony, and then stepped back into the room.

"An excellent place for a murder and robbery," he announced. "The end of the balcony is in darkness, and a man could scale it easily. Do you place prospective victims here, señor?"

"Señor Standon, I assure you——"

"Spare your breath. Your assurances would count for little with me. I always assure myself. Let me have that hot water, and the food."

The landlord scurried out of the room, and Standon put his pack on the table and opened it. He took out a fresh shirt, and when the landlord returned with the hot water he was ready for the cleansing process. By the time he had washed, the landlord came back with a tray of food, which he placed on the table. He stood back against the wall as Standon began eating.

"There are many changes in Chihuahua," the fat landlord said.

"Fleas changing from one cur to another, I suppose," Standon responded, hungrily devouring the food. "Do not tell me that somebody has been building a skyscraper. Do not tell me that!"

"The señor will have his jest."

"Regularly," Standon agreed. "I observed a few things as I was walking up from the depot. I was obliged to kick half a dozen peons off the sidewalk."

"Señor! There was trouble?"

"It was not grave enough to be called trouble. What's the matter with the town, anyway? Somebody starting another revolution?"

"For the love of Heaven, señor, lower your voice!" the landlord begged. "Pray that nobody heard you."

"A lot I care if somebody did!" Standon said.

"Perhaps I had best explain——"

"Explain nothing!" Standon cried. To pretend he was not interested, he knew, was the way to get at the truth. "And, should you happen to know of any gentleman who has an idea of robbing me in this room to-night, advise that gentleman that I always sleep with one eye open, and that I am a dead shot."

"The marksmanship of the señor is well known," the landlord said. "He is my friend, also. If anything should happen to him in my poor lodging, it will be something that I cannot prevent. But these are terrible times, señor."

"I always hear that song in Mexico," Standon observed. "You'd not have it any other way. Life would be unendurable for you if there was continual peace and prosperity."

"For the love of the saints, señor, do not talk politics."

"I have no intention of talking politics. I am not interested in Mexican politics. You may say as much to anybody who asks. I go on to the States



to-morrow afternoon. However, should enemies appear——”

The landlord looked frightened again.

“I trust there will be no trouble in my poor house,” he said. “The señor does not expect enemies to come?”

“Señor, I have no enemies remaining—above the ground,” Standon replied.

The fat landlord shivered. “I should be displeased if the presence of the señor here caused trouble,” he said. “It would involve me with the *policia*.”

“I suppose you mean you’d have to hand the *policia* some change,” Standon observed. “Suppose we put an end to this talk. If there is trouble brewing, it does not interest me. I go on to-morrow, as I have said. I take neither side. If that is properly understood, Mexico and I shall get along very well together for the next fifteen hours or so.”

“I understand, señor. But I would say——”

“Say nothing more at present!” Standon commanded.

The fat landlord sighed, piled the soiled dishes on the tray, and stalked from the room, his dignity shattered for the time being. John Standon filled and lighted his pipe, and puffed lazily for a time. The meal had been very good.

Presently, he got up and walked to one of the windows and looked out. Below him was the narrow street, and beyond was a small plaza where everything was dripping with the fog. Beyond that was the wide avenue, with its bright lights shining through the mist.

It seemed that there were few persons abroad, and Standon, without thinking much about it, blamed that on the fog. Since he was to go on to the States on the day following, and perhaps marry and settle down to being a good American, it would not be amiss to take a walk around the town, he thought. He wanted impressions to carry away, little things to occupy back-hall bedrooms in his memory, that he might drag them forth in years to come, and dream of his wild youth.

He put on his hat, turned out the light, and went out into the hall. Locking the door and taking the key, he went down the rickety stairs to the little lobby. The landlord was in the rear room, quarreling with the cook again.

Standon hung the key in its proper place on the rack, and walked to the door, where he stood looking out into the billows of mist. On the other side of the street a man scurried by with no more noise than a shadow. The fog seemed to be dripping from everything, but Standon knew that it would clear in a measure soon, for it was growing colder rapidly.

He heard an exclamation behind him, and turned to see the landlord coming from the rear room.

"You—that is, you are going out, señor?" he asked.

"To stretch my legs after that confounded railroad journey," Standon replied. He always had hated railroads. A good horse or a man's own legs he took to be proper means of locomotion. "Your

hotel is quite charming, but not attractive enough to compel me to remain in it this evening."

"Is there some hidden meaning to the señor's last words?"

"Heavens—no! Must a man always speak with a double meaning?" Standon asked. "That comes from living in an atmosphere of conspiracies and crimes."

"Señor! Guard your tongue, for the love of saints!"

"You seem to be mighty nervous about something," Standon said.

"If the señor only knew! Repeatedly I have tried to tell him, but——"

"An end of it!" Standon exclaimed. "An end of your insinuations, your mystery, and your state of fright. I am not interested!"

"But, señor——"

"Not interested!" Standon declared.

He turned his back, went through the door, and plunged into the fog.

The fat landlord raised his hands high above his head, rolled his eyes, and called upon Heaven to witness that he had done all that he could. If the big Americano walked into trouble, he had only himself to blame. As for the landlord, he washed his hands of the entire affair.

## CHAPTER II

### AGAINST HEAVY ODDS

STANDON kept close to the buildings as he made his way toward the edge of the little plaza. He stopped there for a moment to peer through the billows of mist and see whether he had been followed from the inn. Some of those he had encountered on his way from the railroad station, and whose heads he had bruised, might be lurking on his trail, he knew. Standon had more than a working knowledge of the Mexican temperament.

Then he went on, and reached the broad avenue with the bright lights. He came to a larger plaza, but there was no band playing to-night. Standon again blamed it on the inclement weather and did not consider that there might be other reasons.

He was walking slowly, alert yet relaxing, puffing at his pipe. He came to where there had been a big dance hall the year before, but to-night it was dark, and the windows were boarded up. There seemed to be no traffic on the avenue. Now and then some man slipped along under the trees noiselessly, and once the sound of loud quarreling came from the distance, but otherwise it was quiet, an ominous quiet that Standon failed to appreciate.

On he went, still following the wide avenue. He was thinking of Texas and his uncle, wondering

whether, after all, it was the proper thing to settle down and give up his life of pursuing adventure and mineral wealth. He was alive to his immediate surroundings, yet he really did not watch where he was going. He knew only that he was following the walk.

So he came to where the wide avenue curved, and another street branched off, and Standon, still thinking deeply, left the avenue without knowing it. After a time it occurred to him that the lights were dim and far between, and then he stopped abruptly and looked around him.

He had left the avenue some distance behind. He was at the edge of a district about which the less said the better; a district of low, narrow buildings, crooked streets half filled with *débris*, where the tinkling of glasses, raucous laughter, coarse jest and questionable song could be heard at all hours of the night.

John Standon knew the district and had gone through it before. He knew that it was no place for an American alone and at night. But the spirit of adventure was with him this night, and perhaps the chill of the fog roused him to action to counteract its effects. He stepped aside, into a dark space, and for a time watched and listened.

Apparently, nobody had been following him. Ahead was a crooked, narrow, filthy street that was poorly lighted. If he went on and met a man there, it would be a thug who would slit a throat for a poorly filled purse. It was a district where the scum of the earth congregated; rascally peons,



renegades, revolutionists, criminals, fugitives from half the countries under the sun.

And backed up against this district was another of quite a different sort; a district of pretentious residences that housed the aristocracy of Chihuahua, descendants of proud Castilian families whose fortunes had dwindled through the frequent changes in politics until only a poor counterfeit of their one-time glory remained.

Behind the pretentious houses were high walls, with gates that seldom were used even by tradesmen. They had gardens in front, and proper entrances on the wide avenue beyond. The high, thick walls seemed to tell the world that what was behind was something not to be considered, an evil thing that could not be destroyed, but did not have to be recognized.

Standon decided, finally, that he might as well follow the narrow street through the district and come to the avenue again on the other tip of its sweeping curve. He stepped out briskly, alert for trouble, watching the shadows that danced along the walls. He evaded the streaks of light where there were open doors, and gave no attention to the few calls directed his way.

Even here there seemed to be few persons on the street, but the sounds that came from some of the buildings told of many within, and once more Standon thought it was because of the weather.

The weather certainly was nasty, evil. Standon felt chilled to the bone. He came to where the street forked, and there was a low, wide building

with windows so dirty a man could not see through them. Standon knew it for a *posada*, a poor sort of inn where bad liquor was sold, where a meal could be obtained, and where a man rented a miserable cot for the night if so inclined. The bad liquor, and the gambling games that always were running, furnished the bulk of the business, however.

The fog had rendered Standon miserable, and perhaps had dulled his wits. Certainly, in his right mind, he would have hesitated before entering such a place. But the thought came to him that a drink of liquor would not hurt, especially on such a night, and after such a tiresome day.

He strode forward and opened the swinging door. He entered the room with a billow of fog.

Standing just inside the door, he blinked his eyes at the light and then glanced around rapidly. There had been loud voices, but they had ceased instantly at his entrance. Standon knew, then, that he had made a mistake, but decided to continue rather than to withdraw, to brazen it out.

A score of men were in the place—thugs, thieves, and murderers. All were Mexicans. They sat around the little tables, drinking and playing cards, and talking of conspiracy, no doubt. An evil crew, John Standon thought, the sweepings of the earth gathered in this festering, sore spot of the city.

They glanced at him from the corners of their eyes, and he looked at them for a moment, and then turned his face away, as though he was not interested in them or their affairs. He looked at the long, greasy bar. Behind it a toothless hag

waddled toward him, a shapeless bundle of fat with a horrible grin on her face.

Standon approached the middle of the bar and turned his back to the room, as though he feared nothing. The buzz of conversation began again, glasses clinked, cards were slapped down on wet tables.

"Señor?" the hag behind the bar asked, smirking at him.

"The night air is damp, mother," Standon said, using the proper words for the district. "I would have something to slay the chill in my bones. Your best liquor!"

The crone grinned again and got a bottle from beneath the bar. She also set out a glass. Standon looked at the glass and smelled of the liquor.

"I said your best liquor," he told the crone. "And I'd like a decent glass, too. I pay for what I get."

It had been a sort of test, he knew. His eyes met those of the hag squarely, and she looked past him at the men in the room. But John Standon did not turn around. He eyed her again, and she mumbled an apology and brought out another bottle. Standon sniffed at it and nodded that it would do. He was given another glass, too. It was far from clean, but it was better than the other.

Standon poured out his drink and tossed a coin on the bar. The hag looked at it, bit at it with the two snags remaining in her mouth, then tucked it away in some hidden pocket of her ragged robe. Standon tossed off the drink and felt it run through

his body like fire. It was poor stuff and almost gagged him; the odor had been deceptive.

Not because he wanted the liquor, but because he did not want to give the impression that he felt ill at ease and was hurrying away, Standon poured out a second drink. The crone grunted, and Standon tossed her another coin. This time she put the coin away without a close inspection of it, which was a compliment in its way.

As Standon raised the glass to his lips, a sibilant sentence reached his ears.

"Observe the Americano; he wallows in liquor like a hog!"

Standon placed the glass back on the bar slowly, deliberately, and turned around, just as slowly and deliberately. His blazing eyes swept the company.

No man met his gaze. He heard a chuckle, but could not decide from which table it came. He saw shoulders shrugged here and there, and that was all.

"To wallow like a hog is proper in a pen with other hogs!" John Standon spoke to the ceiling, and then he lowered his head and looked at them again.

The chuckle stopped suddenly, and there came a sound of a man's breath being sucked in sharply. There was an instant of silence; the crisis was passed. No man had seen fit to reply to Standon's uncomplimentary remark. He had scored for the time being, and knew it.

He turned his back to the room again and reached for the glass. It was a pure spirit of bravado that caused him to drink that liquor now. His eyes

met those of the old crone again, and he found hers gleaming with mingled hatred and admiration. The crone had observed many men in her tempestuous life, had seen them on the other side of the bar when liquor caused them to reveal their real natures; and she knew John Standon instantly for a man of parts.

Standon took his second drink, pushed the glass across the bar, nodded to the crone, and started toward the street door, walking neither too fast nor too slow, not even glancing at the men about the tables. He acted as though they were of such little consequence that he did not grant them the compliment of a thought, good or bad.

He had almost reached the door when the sibilant voice reached his ears again.

"Cowardly dog!"

Standon had been fighting to control himself, but that exclamation wrecked his self-control. It was like a flaming match to a heap of combustibles. He whirled on the balls of his feet, leaning forward a bit, his eyes blazing, his fists doubled.

"If that remark was meant for me," he said, in a voice that shook with rage, "suppose the man who made it stands up and lets me have a look at his ugly face before I batter it in!"

There was silence for a moment, save for gasps from those at the tables. Then a chair scraped against the floor and was hurled against the wall, and a man stood up.

Standon observed him quickly; a man of medium height but broad and heavy in the shoulders, a man with the face of a beast on which the lines of im-

proper living and improper thinking easily could be seen.

"I made the remark, if the señor cares to know!" he said. "And now it is my pleasure to elaborate on it. I say that the señor is a dog, a cowardly American cur without courage enough to resent the deadliest of insults. And here I stand, waiting to see what he intends doing about these so true remarks of mine!"

There was but one thing for a man with any self-respect to do after that, of course. John Standon did it.

With a roar of rage, he launched himself toward the other man, took half a dozen running strides and reached his side. His fists came up; the two men clashed.

For a moment they exchanged blows, and then they grasped each other in their arms; they broke away again, and charged forward, swinging their fists. Neither spoke now; this was a battle where words played no part.

John Standon sensed, in that first moment, that he faced no mean antagonist. This fellow undoubtedly was a Mexican, but there was a strain of Indian in him, too. He could take punishment, and he was clever with his fists to a certain extent.

Standon retreated a bit, so as to get his back against the wall of the room, for he did not fancy having one of the others attack him from the rear, perhaps with a knife. Those in the inn were standing back, shrieking encouragement to their champion. Standon knew that he was in for it. To be vic-



torious would mean more fighting, for these men would not see their companion beaten and not resent it. And he was far from the wide avenue, in a part of the town where the members of the *policia* did not intrude unless something unusual occurred. The murder of a single *Americano* would be nothing unusual.

Standon's adversary was rushing the fighting now, and therein he made a mistake. He had taken Standon's momentary retreat as a sign of fear. But now Standon attacked furiously, beating the other back a step, hammering at his face and body. The Mexican rushed forward again into a clinch. Standon sensed in that instant that victory was with him, that he could handle this man. He exerted all his strength, twisted his opponent, bent him back in such a position that he could almost handle him at will.

But his adversary twisted free, sprang backward, whipped out a knife, and charged forward again. Standon had been expecting it, yet the unfairness of it caused a fresh rush of anger. He sprang aside to escape the blow, darted in again and clasped the other's wrist, and once more he bent him back, the wrist over his knee, so that he could snap it.

The Mexican dropped the knife and cried out with the pain. Standon understood the rapid words. The man was calling upon his companions for help.

And now growls of rage came from the others, and the light was reflected from half a score of knives. Standon, clasping his antagonist to him, edged toward the street door. He was thinking what

a fool he had been to leave the hotel without taking the revolver from his pack and carrying it with him.

They gathered, rushed. Standon hurled his man straight at them, flooring two or three, disconcerting the others. Again they rushed. Standon had gained the corner nearest the door, but he had no weapon except a chair he had seized. With this he beat them off. He was afraid only of the knives; he knew that they would not dare shoot for fear of putting a bullet into one of their own number.

Yet the end of the battle did not seem in doubt. He could not think how he could emerge victorious. They were a score against one, they were armed, and they would not hesitate to use their knives as soon as a proper opportunity came. There was but one thing Standon could do: fight his best as long as he could stand, break as many heads as possible, give them something to remember him by.

Keeping to the corner, Standon grasped another chair, and used it on the heads of his antagonists until it was a wreck. He had no hope, now, of getting away. He could not expect help. A red rage was upon him, and he thought only of going down fighting, of doing all the damage he could first.

This was to be the end of him, he supposed. In the morning the hacked body of John Standon, American, would be found in an alley, and the *policia* would think only that there was another trouble-maker gone. He would be judged by the district in which his body was found.

Renewed strength came to him at the thought, and once more he launched himself forward unex-

pectedly, surprising his foes and driving them back for an instant. Two men he floored. A knife was hurled at him, but he dodged it and let it clatter against the wall. And then he was in his corner again, bending low, guarding on every side.

The man who first had attacked him was shrieking commands now, and Standon realized that he was some sort of a leader. His heart was pounding at his ribs and there was a roaring in his ears, so that he could not catch the meaning of the other's shouts.

He heard the street door hurled open, and turned a bit to look toward it. More foes were arriving, he supposed. The odds against him were not great enough! Every thug in the district wanted to be in at the kill!

He saw a giant of a man, a man whose hair was turning white, and who had a look in his face that told he was not a thug. A Spaniard, Standon knew at a glance, a man of good family and breeding, probably a renegade, since he was here.

And then Standon received a welcome shock. For an instant the newcomer watched the battle, and then he hurled himself forward, but remaining close to the wall as though in an effort to get to Standon's side.

"Courage, señor!" he called. "Have at the dogs! Beat off the curs, señor! I am here to help you!"

John Standon scarcely could have faith in his ears. He remained on guard as he fought, thinking this was a subterfuge of the man to get close to him. But he was not in doubt long.

The big Spaniard launched himself into the fray like a maniac. He used only his fists, but he used them with good effect. He bore down on Standon's foes like a whirlwind, shrieking at them, taunting them, giving blows when he could.

"This way, señor!" he implored. "Treat the beasts as they deserve! Teach them that they cannot stand before proper men!"

Side by side, Standon and the newcomer fought their way to the door and through it to the narrow street. But they were by no means free of their foes. Some had run from the rear door and were around in front now waiting for them. They were in the open, but the battle continued.

"At them, señor!" the big Spaniard was shrieking.

They fought their way across the street and came to a wall behind one of the pretentious residences. Standon thought that the only thing was to keep to the high walls and make their way to the avenue some distance away, keeping back their foes as well as they could. It might have been possible if he and the big Spaniard had weapons, he believed. But they were not armed, and here in the semidarkness their foes had a big advantage. They knew every square foot of the district, naturally; and they could scatter at times and hurl their knives.

Other men came running from disreputable resorts of the neighborhood, attracted by the tumult; for word had been passed that there was fair game in the crooked street: an Americano and a big Spaniard who befriended him.

Fighting with his back to the wall it seemed to

Standon that his brain cleared. He realized for the first time that the hate of their foes seemed directed against the big Spaniard even more than to himself. He heard some of the peons cursing him, heard the Spaniard reply with taunts that enraged them.

"Close to my side, señor," the Spaniard called. "They cannot stand against real men, these curs! Ha!"

He knocked aside a knife and sent to the ground with a single blow the man who had attempted to use it. Then Standon realized that they were cornered at last. They were against one of the high walls, against the gate, to be precise. But that meant nothing, for they could not expect the gate to be opened. Were the people of that household at home, they would hesitate before opening the wall gate and allowing that mob of thugs and human curs to invade the garden. They needed only a chance, an excuse, to loot.

Standon's breath was coming in little gasps now, and his arms seemed as heavy as iron. He guessed that the end was near. Once he slipped, faltered, and a knife would have gone between his ribs had it not been for the big Spaniard.

"Courage, señor!" he cried.

"I'm almost—done," Standon gasped.

"Fight it out!"

"Thanks for your aid!" Standon said. "But they are too many for us, I'm afraid!"

Their foes rushed again. Side by side, with their backs to the wall, Standon and the Spaniard received

the charge. Standon felt a knife slash his left arm, felt the wind of one as it flew past his head and clattered against the adobe wall.

The tone of their antagonists' cries had changed now, and there was a note of victory in it. Standon could hear the raucous commands of the man with whom he had fought at first. He was fighting mechanically, scarcely realizing what he was doing, realizing little except that his breathing was labored, that pains were shooting through his chest, and that the big Spaniard was still shrieking challenges at the ferocious mob.

Standon hated to think of such an end. He would have liked it different. But he reflected, even as he fought, that a certain sort of death is one thing few men can choose. He tried to rally his remaining strength, tried to make one more effort. His fist crushed into a leering face, and then he fell back against the wall again, panting, exhausted, expecting a death blow.

But the big Spaniard was not done. He stepped before Standon and held the crowd at bay, his fists flying on either side, his head dodging this way and that to escape the knives. He grasped one man and hurled him at the mob, disconcerted them for an instant, and aided Standon to his feet.

"Courage, señor! Get your breath and we will get at them again!" he cried.

"I'm—done!" Standon gasped.

"What? I took you for a Texan! A Texan—and done?"

There was a rebuke in the big Spaniard's voice,



and Standon felt it. He hurled himself forward again, retreated once more to the semisecurity of the wall. But the end was only delayed a moment, he felt. The mob backed away, prepared for the final rush, listening to their leader as he instructed them.

And then the unexpected happened. A window in the dark house behind them was thrown open, flame split the darkness, a stream of bullets was directed at the mob.

At the same instant, the gate behind Standon and the Spaniard gave way, was opened a couple of feet, and they sprawled inside the garden. Standon, as he fell exhausted upon the pavement that ran to the rear entrance of the house, knew only that somebody had closed the gate again, and that the men in the alley were replying to the fire from the window.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCERNING A BANDIT

AS though from a great distance, Standon heard the voice of the big Spaniard and a woman's voice replying. It was so dark in the garden that he could see nothing. The shrieking mob on the other side of the wall had ceased firing and were battering already at the gate.

Standon felt his arm grasped, and realized that the Spaniard was helping him to his feet.

"Come, señor; we must get into the house," he said.

Aided by the big Spaniard, Standon staggered along the walk, brushing against the shrubbery wet with the fog. He was fighting to get his breath, trying to understand.

"Two steps up, señor," the Spaniard said.

He went up the steps. He knew that a door had been opened, and that they had passed into the house. To his ears came the sounds of the key being turned in the lock and the heavy bar being dropped into place.

And then a light flamed, and John Standon, reeling against the wall, braced himself there and shaded his eyes with a hand. The big Spaniard was beside him, breathing heavily, his coat in ribbons from the knives of the mob, his eyes still flashing, his manner that of a man who had not finished with fighting.

Behind the Spaniard was a woman, dressed like a woman of wealth and position. And just behind her was another, a señorita. Standon knew at the first glance that this was quite the most charming señorita he ever had met.

"Ha! That was a battle!" the Spaniard cried. "But we were near the end, I confess. How does it happen, Doña Inez, that you were able to come to our rescue. Those shots from the window and the opening of the gate——"

"'Twas I who opened the gate," the little señorita said.

"For the love of the saints! You did such a thing, in the face of that mob?"

"It was to save your life, Don Felipe."

"And that reminds me," the big Spaniard said. "It were better if we had some introductions and explanations here. Señor, I make known my name: Don Felipe Mendoza, at your service."

"I am John Standon, of Texas." The reply came in gasps as Standon struggled to breathe normally.

"Come to this chair, and take it," Don Felipe said. "You are on your last legs, as they have the saying."

Standon stepped away from the wall and into the bright light. Now they got a good look at him as he staggered toward the distant chair. The little señorita gave a cry and ran toward him.

"Señor! You are wounded!"

"A scratch—it did not cut deep," Standon said. "It is nothing. Don Felipe Mendoza, I owe you my life, without doubt."

"We both owe our lives to these charming ladies," Don Felipe said.

"That is true. I meant no discourtesy. I—I scarcely am myself yet."

"Señor Standon, this is Doña Inez Flores, without doubt the most charming señora in all Mexico," Don Felipe said.

Standon bowed; the señora blushed.

"And here is Señorita Bianca Flores, her niece," Don Felipe continued. "Now we all know one another. This is the house of Doña Inez, but I did not think she was sojourning here at present. And that reminds me, Doña Inez! How does it happen that you are in the city at this time?"

"There was grave news, Don Felipe," the señora replied. She indicated that she did not care to speak before Standon. "And you have not told us, Don Felipe, how it happened that you were fighting a mob of thugs beneath my windows."

"Ha!" Don Felipe cried. "As you know, I have been in the city for several days, keeping my eyes open. I was prowling this evening about the unmentionable district in the rear, where conspirators forgather and arrange their plans. I saw this big Americano walking down the street alone, and followed at a distance. You understand? He looked to be formidable, and were he against us I wanted to know the truth. If there were important reinforcements—you understand?"

"I understand?" said Doña Inez.

"He entered a foul *posada*, and I managed to watch through one of the windows, though the saints

know that it scarcely is possible to see through a pane because of the dirt. A thug insulted him, and he resented it, though they were a score against one. Ha! It was a pretty fight."

"Don Felipe——" Standon begged.

"I must tell the tale," Don Felipe declared. "He fought like a wild man, this big Americano. And he got the better of the man who had started it, and then the others rushed in."

"That is their way," Doña Inez said.

"His back against the wall, this big Americano stood them off. I could not endure to see it, of course, especially since they got out their knives. And so I ran into the *posada* and did my poor best to help him."

"You saved me, señor," Standon said simply. "And then these ladies saved us both."

"May the saints bless them for it!" Don Felipe exclaimed. "But I have not told the ladies the cream of the jest. I have not told them the name of the man with whom you fought at first, the man you dared challenge in his own den, in the midst of his companions."

"His name?" Doña Inez asked, with quick interest.

"José Garabito!"

Don Felipe Mendoza spoke the name in a loud voice. There was an instant of silence, then the two women stepped toward John Standon.

"You—you fought him?" Doña Inez said. "Oh thank you, señor, thank you!"

"All my thanks, señor!" Señorita Bianca added, her eyes glistening as she looked at him.

Standon raised his head and sat up straighter in the chair. He was breathing normally now, and his strength was returning, together with his wits.

"Garabito?" he said. "Gabarito? Oh, yes! I have heard of him, it seems."

"Heard of him!" Don Felipe gasped. "Where in the name of Heaven have you been hiding yourself that you have not heard of him?"

"For the past year or more I have been in the mountains far to the south, searching for gold," Standon answered. "I but returned to Chihuahua this evening. I was just taking a walk before retiring, and happened into this end of town, not with any evil intention, I assure you. I resented an insult—that is all."

"But you fought him!" the little señorita said. "Whether you knew the man or not, you fought him. Thank you for that, señor, from the bottom of my heart."

"And he marked the brute, too!" Don Felipe declared. "He thrashed him well and made him call upon his thugs for help. Once he bent him across his knee. He picked him up and hurled him at the others!"

"Listen! How they are shrieking in the alley!" Doña Inez said. "I would that you had killed this José Garabito, señor!"

Standon was surprised at the venom in her tone and looked at her quickly. Her eyes were flashing. Señorita Bianca showed her enmity, too, at mention of the man's name.

"Señor Standon does not understand," Don Felipe



said. "I shall give you a quick explanation, señor. Doña Inez and her charming niece, like myself, once enjoyed wealth and social prestige. But surely you know how it has been with us for years, señor. First one patriot and then another leading his band of thugs. Patriot! May the saints forgive them the use of the word!

"What things are done in the name of liberty and patriotism! Every son of evil who can command a few followers starts a revolution, offering loot, battle, adventure, and excitement. They never get beyond the loot. When it comes to organizing a new government, they change followers or leaders, as the case may be, and start another war. There is no profit for bandits in an organized government, no matter what man heads it.

"And we of the better class have suffered the most. Little by little we have been stripped. To-day it is one faction and to-morrow it is another. Our wealth is gone. This residence in which we stand is almost all that remains to Doña Inez and the señorita, save a big hacienda far to the north, where nothing has been left but crumbling walls. As for myself, I have nothing left.

"And this José Garabito—he is the worst bandit of all, señor. Nothing is sacred to him. He hates persons of good blood and breeding, and he has gone out of his way to wreck their lives. He would rather have a chance at me with his knife than loot a store. I have been very active against him, you see. And he hates Doña Inez because she has evaded him, and the señorita because she belongs to the

family. Doña Inez fled the hacienda with all her jewels, a month ago, before José Garabito and his men arrived. He never will forget that.

"There are things that I cannot tell you just now, señor, not knowing you well enough, but this much I can say: José Garabito is a beast in human form, the most cruel of all bandits we have endured. The things he has done to men and women of good blood are almost beyond belief. You, since you have been out of touch, cannot imagine how we hate him. His name is a thing of terror between here and the border. But he reserves his cruelty for his betters; he treats the lower classes and the Indians with great kindness, gives them chances to loot, and adds them to his force of followers!

"He is the big chief, yet he has a lieutenant fully as bad: Ben Tarker, from Heaven knows what country. It is said that he is a renegade Englishman, but I cannot believe that. What deviltry José Garabito cannot imagine, this Ben Tarker can. Between them, señor, they have rendered our lives scarcely worth the living."

"And that reminds me," Doña Inez said. "I should have told you before. We are in desperate straits now, Don Felipe."

"How is this?"

"It is the answer to my presence in the town. Bianca and I came in early to-day, and to-night we dressed as you see us, to have one last touch of the old glory. After the dinner had been served, we sent all the servants away. We had intended

riding back toward the north within an hour or so. But it may be too late."

"Too late?" Don Felipe asked.

"I did not discover it until yesterday," Doña Inez said. "You were in the city doing your work, and I had no one to send. And so I came myself, and Bianca with me, and we spread the warning. Many of our friends have left already, to hide in the hills."

"What is this you are trying to tell me?" Don Felipe asked.

"That José Garabito strikes to-night! To-night he takes Chihuahua, if he can."

"Attacks Chihuahua to-night?"

"From the inside," Doña Inez said. "I learned of it through our regular channel. He is not like the others, to march upon the city with an army. He wanted to—to catch the persons of good blood, you see. For days his men have been drifting into the city in twos and threes, and making themselves comfortable and ready. Garabito himself often comes here, you know, and the *policia* have allowed it as long as he came alone, not wanting to infuriate his admirers.

"And to-night he strikes. Midnight was to be the hour, but they may strike sooner, since this trouble. In every corner of the city, at midnight, José Garabito's men will use fire and gun. They will loot and burn. They will seize all of us they can find. Do you not understand? Garabito expects to take the aristocrats by surprise, to catch them before they can get away. He—he even has planned a great celebration at his stronghold back in the hills, when

the men of the aristocrats are to be tortured to death, and the women——”

She stopped. John Standon made a horrible noise deep in his throat. There was no need for Doña Inez Flores to say more; he understood.

“And you?” Don Felipe asked.

“I came with the warning, spread the news as well as I could. Then Bianca and I took leave of our home. We were about to change into riding things when we heard the tumult in the alley. We must get away soon if we are to get away at all, must leave the city and ride toward the north. And it will be perilous, for Garabito’s men will be upon every road coming to Chihuahua to join in the loot and murder—dogs coming to the feast!”

“But the federal soldiers?” Don Felipe persisted.

“Decoyed from town this morning on a false scent. Oh, Garabito thought of everything!”

“At midnight, you said?”

“That was to have been the hour. But they may strike sooner, now. Garabito has seen you, and he knows that we are in this house, since we opened the gate to you. He would rather capture us, as you know, than a score of others. Listen! Hear them shrieking in the alley! They will be through the wall gate soon!”

For a moment they were silent, listening. The shrieks and howls of the mob were fearful to the ears. They could hear a battering, too, and knew that the gate soon would go. And then they would be at the house, battering at the doors, trying to get through the windows.

Don Felipe Mendoza stalked across the hall and stopped beside the chair in which John Standon was sitting.

"I never met you before this evening, señor," he said, "but I think that I can read men, and I have had no hesitancy in introducing you to these ladies. That shows that I vouch for you."

"Thank you, señor."

"We are under some small obligation to them, I believe?"

"A great obligation, señor," Standon said, getting out of the chair and bowing at them.

"Then I have a proposition to make to you, señor."

"I am listening, Don Felipe."

"Do not answer through gratitude, but according to the dictates of reason."

"I understand."

"These ladies and myself, and some others, are engaged in an enterprise about which I cannot tell you at present. I feel that we need your assistance. Will you join us, señor, and put yourself subject to our orders? Will you do this, and ask no questions? We shall expect absolute loyalty, of course. And I will tell you this much: you will be breaking no law, even of your own fair land, and you will be fighting José Garabito and all of that for which he stands."

"Under your orders absolutely?"

"Si, señor!" Don Felipe said.

"Knowing no more than I know now?"

"Precisely."

"And I am to ask no questions?"

"You have it, señor!" Don Felipe stepped close to him. "Answer as your good reason dictates. Do not join us through gratitude. If you wish, señor, I shall conduct you to the front of the house, and see that you reach the avenue safely, and then you may return to your hotel. And that will be an end of it. Or, if you join us, you place yourself under orders immediately and promise on word of honor to ask no questions. Little by little, when we feel safer, we shall inform you of everything. There is scant time, señor. Those devils will be through the gate almost immediately. What is your answer, if you please?"

Standon looked at him, and then looked at Doña Inez and the little señorita.

"Señor," he replied to Don Felipe, "I am a citizen of the United States. I care nothing for Mexico's quarrels."

A look of astonishment came into Don Felipe's face, then a flush of anger. Doña Inez gasped her surprise. Señorita Bianca Flores gave an explanation that expressed something akin to loathing.

"In that case, señor," Don Felipe Mendoza said, cold dignity and disgust mingled in his voice, "allow me to conduct you to the front door. The bandits are not in front yet, I feel sure. You can easily reach the avenue and continue to your hotel without injury to your precious hide!"

Standon was scarcely able to conceal a grin. "One moment, Don Felipe!" he protested. "As I have remarked, I care nothing for Mexico's quarrels. But I do not need to ask questions, nor to listen to your



long explanations, to make up my mind to aid ladies in distress, especially those who have just saved my life. I had assumed long ago that, if there was another row, I'd be in it. You need not go to the front door, Don Felipe, unless it is to barricade it better."

"Ha! A caballero!" Don Felipe Mendoza cried happily, slapping Standon on the shoulder so that he almost winced from the pain of the blow. "I felt sure that I could not have been mistaken in you so utterly, señor!"

"Thanks, Señor Standon!" Doña Inez said, offering him her hand for the first time.

But what John Standon relished most was the expression he found in the face of Señorita Bianca Flores. It seemed to say that her faith and trust in man was renewed. Her eyes were starry, she smiled frankly at him, blushed a bit, and the dimples played about the corners of her mouth.

A step she took toward him, blushing more, suddenly afraid to meet his eyes again.

"Thanks, señor," she whispered. "I shall be braver if I have you for a champion."

And then there came a sudden volley from the alley, and bullets spattered against the wall and crashed through some of the windows. There was a hammering against the door. José Garabito and his bandits were at the house!

## CHAPTER IV

### BESIEGED

**D**ON FELIPE MENDOZA was stirred to instant action. He whirled toward Doña Inez and began speaking rapidly.

"The horses are ready? How many have you prepared? You and the señorita will have to change costumes quickly. Shall we get out by the secret way?" he asked.

"Four horses," she replied. "One for each of us. We had intended using two of them for pack animals, you see. But we did not have the chance to-day to get the—the supplies. And so we'll have to stop at dawn in the hidden cañon, and take supplies from there, remain during the day, and then ride on."

"It is well," Don Felipe said.

"Bianca and I can change in a short time."

"Ha! Then Señor Standon and I shall defend the house right merrily until you ladies are ready."

"Weapons and ammunition are in the anteroom, Don Felipe," the señora replied. She led the way from the room, the little señorita following her with a backward glance at Standon.

"How about that wound, señor?" Don Felipe asked, after the ladies had disappeared.

"I told the truth, it is but a scratch. It has stopped bleeding."

"I am glad. I had feared that you were making light of a serious matter because of the presence of the fair ones. You need not do that, señor. Our women are not the frail, fainting kind they once were. These continual wars and wrongs have put the iron into their blood, señor. I have seen the dainty Doña Inez fire a rifle until her shoulder was black and blue and the barrel of the weapon hot in her blistered hands. Ah, these turbulent days!"

"She has spirit," Standon said.

There came another battering at the door, and Don Felipe felt moved to action again. He rushed into the little room adjoining and returned with belts, automatics, and clips of cartridges. He tossed a brace of weapons and a belt of ammunition to Standon, and buckled on his own.

"We shall make a stand here," he said. "They will get through that door, I suppose, and we must check them until the ladies are ready. Listen! They are at the front, too. But I feel sure that they cannot enter there readily. The doors are strong and the windows barred. José Garabito has begun his slaughter ahead of time, I take it, because of the row we started with him. Pray that he gets his hands on none of us!"

Then they ceased speaking for a time and got to work. Heavy articles of furniture were piled in front of the door, and put at either side of the hallway so they could fire from behind them if the need arose.

The mob in the garden was smashing at the

house, shrieking and yelling and cursing like demons, and above the din rose now and then the commanding voice of José Garabito.

"He is a natural leader," Don Felipe complained. "Those thugs admire him and would follow him through Hades itself, because he can give them lessons in cruelty and brutality. Suppose we startle them, señor?"

Don Felipe emptied his automatic at the door, and Standon did likewise. A new chorus of shrieks and cries told that their bullets had reached some of the thugs, and the assault against the door was redoubled.

"José Garabito thinks," said Don Felipe, "that he has us in a trap. He is due to be surprised. But we may have hot work at that before the ladies are ready for the journey to the north. It was necessary that they change costumes. Save for a volley now and then, we'll save ammunition, señor, until the climax."

John Standon was his old self now, and prepared for the battle he felt sure was coming. He overturned a sofa and fixed a place behind it, from which he could shoot down the narrow hall toward the door without exposing himself to any great extent.

Standon was wondering how Don Felipe hoped to escape with the women if the house was surrounded, and the battering on all sides told that it was. It seemed to Standon that they were indeed in a trap from which they could not hope to escape.

On the other side of the hall, Don Felipe fixed

his own personal barricade, and then sat with his back against the wall watching the door and humming an air beneath his breath. Standon glanced at him. What a man he was! What a giant frame! What fire in his eyes! And yet Don Felipe, Standon knew at a glance, was well along the road in years. But through his veins flowed blood that never cools until rendered cold by death.

A new assault came at the door, and once more they emptied their automatics and hastened to reload. In the garden there was comparative silence for a moment, as though the thugs were holding some sort of a conference; and then came a chorus of shrieks and cries of pain, and much loud cursing. Again a volley crashed against the side of the house, and more windows were shattered, and above the din there rang out a woman's musical laugh.

"That is Doña Inez," Don Felipe said to Standon. "What has that wonderful woman been doing now, I wonder?"

The assault against the door became more furious. They could hear José Carabito shrieking his commands and urging his men on with the promise of rich loot. Standon's face grew white with anger, as he listened, and Don Felipe Mendoza ripped out a stout Spanish oath.

"'Twill be a pleasure to get a few of the devils, even if I lose my own life!" Don Felipe declared. "But we must not forget, señor, that it is our duty to afford the ladies protection. I tremble to think what could happen to them were we to be slain."

Now the bandits had obtained possession of some

sort of battering ram, and they smashed it against the door until it swayed against the bolts, bars, and hinges. Crouching behind the protections they had erected, Standon and the Spaniard prepared for furious combat. Blow after blow struck against the door, until it seemed that it could not stand as much as half a minute longer.

They heard a voice behind them: "My aunt will be ready in a short time, señores."

"Thank the saints for that!" Don Felipe exclaimed, without turning around. "It will be hot here before very long."

John Standon turned his head. Before him was Señorita Bianca Flores. Only now the beautiful gown she had worn was gone, and the little slippers that had twinkled beneath the edge of it. The señorita was dressed as a boy, in ragged trousers, shirt and coat, worn boots, and with a tattered sombrero on her head hiding her curls. At that first glance, Standon thought that she made a wonderful sort of boy, and he must have revealed something of his frank admiration in the expression of his face, for the señorita blushed and turned her head away.

"I trust that the señor will not think me immodest," she said, so that Standon scarcely heard her. "This garb is necessary, señor, as you will understand after a time."

"I could think nothing improper of you, señorita," Standon replied.

"I have with me a basin of water and soft



cloths, señor. My aunt says that I am to cleanse your wound."

"It is but a scratch," Standon said. "Do not distress yourself because of it."

"I must obey my aunt, señor, if you'll be kind enough to step back here and remove your coat."

"Better do it, Standon!" Don Felipe said. "When Doña Inez gives orders, they are to be obeyed. Stand ready, and I'll call if these beggars start through the door."

Standon stepped back into the room, and the señorita began her work, going about it as though it were nothing new for her. Standon never had been more surprised in his life. Women of this class generally were ready to faint at the sight of blood, but it did not seem to affect Señorita Bianca.

"I am deeply grateful, señorita, but could have spared you this," Standon said.

She laughed merrily at him by way of answer. "Continual warfare changes natures, señor," she replied. "This is not the first wound that I have washed nor the first arm that I have bandaged. And my aunt—a short time ago the most feminine of women—a few minutes ago, threw boiling water out of an upstairs window on those scoundrels in the garden before the door. That was what they were screeching about. You'll know more about it soon, señor."

"The bandits will be through that door before very long," Standon said. "I suppose that we are to make our escape from the house?"

"I believe that the señor was to ask no questions," she said, her eyes sparkling at him.

"I beg your pardon!"

"But I will say this much, señor—we certainly are to escape from this house."

John Standon began wondering how they expected to do it, with the bandits surrounding the place and more arriving every minute to join in the fray. For now they were battering at the front and on every side. Don Felipe Mendoza was sending bullets crashing through the hall door now and then, and the men outside were riddling it with their weapons. The battering ram struck at intervals, and the heavy door shivered and splintered a bit.

"There, señor, it is done!" Señorita Bianca said.

Standon thanked her and drew on his coat. He was glad to find that she had bandaged the arm so that he had free use of it. It revealed that she knew the art of it. He had expected to see her face go white, but it did not.

"On the ride we shall take presently, señor," she said, "I look to you to be at my side. Don Felipe Mendoza, it is certain, will have eyes for nobody but my aunt."

Standon laughed. "I'll be more than pleased," he replied. "You may be assured of my poor protection."

"Poor, señor? A man who attacked José Garabito with his bare hands, when that bandit was in the midst of his rascally followers?"

"But I did not then know the man or his reputation, señorita."

"Which makes not the slightest difference at all, señor. Had you known him for what he was, you would have attacked him the same, I feel sure. Ah, señor, you must never fall into his hands now. He does terrible things to those who oppose his methods, and think what he might do to a man who had struck him, as you did!"

"I assure you, señorita, that I have no intention of allowing José Garabito to take me prisoner," Standon answered.

There came another crash against the hall door, another volley from the bandits in the garden, and another chorus of fiendish shrieks and yells.

"Standon!" Don Felipe called suddenly. "They are at us!"

The little señorita was forgotten in an instant. John Standon dashed back into the narrow hall and prostrated himself behind the overturned sofa he had prepared for this emergency, peering around the end of it and watching the door.

The door was shaking on its hinges now because of the repeated assaults upon it. One of the bars was down. The mob outside shrieked its fury and delivered a fusillade. Many of the bullets entered and swept along the hall.

"Keep out of the path of fire, Bianca!" Don Felipe Mendoza called. "And be kind enough to tell your good aunt to make haste. We must get out of this as soon as possible."

Standon did not turn to look at the señorita again. The battering ram struck against the door again, and it toppled inward, leaning against the

furniture the men had placed there. At the top there was a small open space, and instantly it was filled with sombreros and heads.

Standon needed no orders; he emptied his automatic immediately at that aperture, and noticed that Don Felipe was doing the same. The faces disappeared as though by magic, there were cries and groans of pain, curses, more loud commands from José Garabito.

"At them, señor!" Don Felipe shrieked. "Give them a dose of hot lead! Clean out the wolf pack, señor! Ha! Stand against proper men, will they? Ha!"

Now they were struggling to push the door over the obstacles, and making some little progress. Standon knew that it was only a matter of time until they would be inside the house. José Garabito had promised them a chance of looting it, and every man of his considered that perhaps others would fall, but that he would live to steal and wield the torch.

A fusillade came from outside, and Standon and Don Felipe crouched behind their protections while they reloaded their weapons. Then there was an attempt at a rush, but they emptied their automatics and stopped it for the moment. José Garabito was almost balked; he was losing men rapidly and had nothing to show for it.

"In!" they could hear him shrieking. "Do you let an Americano and a single hated aristocrat prevent? In—or I set fire to the house, and then there will be no chance for loot!"

Standon had been wondering how it happened

that the house was not fired. Fire was a popular weapon with such scum, he knew well. But he supposed that Garabito wanted to loot if possible—and he wanted live prisoners, too.

Again Standon found himself wondering how the four of them were to escape. How could they get out, get to the horses Doña Inez had mentioned, get free of the city and ride toward the north, when the place was swarming with their foes?

But he had no time to speculate regarding it. The assault was becoming more determined. Garabito's threat to fire the house and so destroy the chances for loot was having its effect, as the bandit chief had judged it would have.

The battering ram was at work again, the door was thrust down more, and some of the furniture behind it was cleared away. The aperture was larger now. Standon and Don Felipe Mendoza cleared it repeatedly with their automatics, but it always was filled again with evil, murder-mad faces.

And then there was a call behind them.

"We are ready, Don Felipe!"

Standon glanced back as he refilled his weapon. Doña Inez was beside the señorita now. She, too, was dressed like a man, save that she had a long coat over her costume. Doña Inez did not have the slender form of a boy.

"Dash to the end of the hall and into the first room, señor," Don Felipe commanded. "When I give the word! Now!"

Again they emptied their weapons at the door, and then turned and fled to safety at the end of the hall

before their foes had a chance to fire at them. They darted into the first room, and closed and locked the door to the hall.

"A frail thing, but it will delay them a moment," Don Felipe said.

They hurried across the room and entered another, closing and locking the second door behind them. A chorus of yells and shrieks told them that the bandits were in the hall already. Standon glanced at this great room in surprise. How magnificent it once had been! How magnificent it was yet!

He followed the others across to a gigantic fireplace, and there they stopped, and while Standon looked on with wonder, Doña Inez put her hand against one of the tiles of the fireplace and pressed, and an opening appeared in the wall beneath a large painting.

"The way out, señor," she said.

"If you ladies will proceed," Don Felipe said, bowing before them.

"Let us wait a moment, Don Felipe," the señorita begged. "I am leaving the home of my family for the last time. José Garabito will not fail to destroy it. Let me look upon it as long as I can."

The bandits were in the other room now, and already were hammering at the last door.

"Bianca, get into the tunnel," Doña Inez commanded. "At all costs, we must prevent them from seeing you. So much depends upon it."

The girl stepped into the dark tunnel without making reply. Don Felipe was standing at one side, Standon at the other, with Doña Inez between them.



"It is time to go," Don Felipe said. "It desolates me, dear lady, that you should lose your home, but we do not care to have you lose your precious life also."

"Wait until they break through the door," she said. "I would give them something by which they may remember me. Señor Standon, do you be prepared to go after Señorita Bianca. Don Felipe, you will close the entrance."

"When you are safely inside, dear lady!" Don Felipe told her. "Standon, be ready with your gun. We'll give them a last volley in their precious faces. How I hate to run from the scum! I would rather die fighting."

"But there are others of whom we must think!" Doña Inez reminded him.

"Can I forget them?" Don Felipe asked.

Standon was puzzled at their speech, but remembered that he had promised to ask no questions, and he was watching the door, holding his automatic ready.

A final crash, and the door slammed to the floor. Into the big room poured the motley crew—dirty, ragged, intoxicated, infuriated, beastlike, lawless!

They scattered as they entered, and prepared for fight. They thought their quarry was making a last stand, for a sight of the opening of the tunnel was denied them, since the light in the room was uncertain, and Standon and Don Felipe were standing before the aperture.

Automatics spat fire; the bandits fell back toward the door again. And then Doña Inez took a quick

step forward, one hand coming from a pocket of her coat, and she tossed something across the room.

An explosion followed that seemed to rock the house. Men shrieked and tried to flee. Plaster, bits of furniture, stone, and brick rained upon them.

"In!" Doña Inez cried.

Standon sprang into the blackness of the tunnel, where Señorita Bianca was waiting. Doña Inez followed him swiftly. Don Felipe Mendoza, who was standing to one side in the tunnel's mouth, pressed quickly against the wall in a certain place, and the opening suddenly was closed, shutting out the scene of death and desolation, the shrieks of the wounded and the mad cries of those who survived.

"Since my house is to be destroyed, why not destroy it in part myself, and some of those cowardly bandits along with it?" Doña Inez said, laughing peculiarly.

John Standon marveled at the woman. She might have been speaking of cutting a bouquet of roses in the patio.

## CHAPTER V

### THE RIDE BEGINS

STANDON made an attempt to realize the situation. Here they were in some sort of an underground passage, no doubt, and within a few feet of them, just through a thick wall, were men eager for their lives, who, if possible, would take those lives through cruel torture.

It stood to reason that the bandits would be through the wall in a short time, unless they elected to dynamite it and bury their foes alive. But they scarcely would do that, since José Garabito was so eager to take these people prisoners.

Standon began wondering whether Don Felipe and Doña Inez really knew what they were doing. This underground tunnel plunged in darkness was all right in its way, but everything seemed to depend upon whether there was a safe way out of it. Standon did not like such an arrangement. He would rather have taken his chances in the open, a good horse between his knees and his own tried and trusted revolver in his hand. Under those conditions, relying only upon himself, he felt that he could have made an excellent fight of it.

But Doña Inez had passed the others and was leading the way along the dark tunnel. Standon followed her, so close that he could touch her shoul-

der. The señorita clung to the tail of Standon's coat, and Don Felipe was in the rear, explaining that he was guarding against stragglers. That was Don Felipe's jest, since the tunnel was so low and narrow that two could not pass in it.

They followed it for the space of perhaps a hundred yards. The air was stagnant, dead. It was exceedingly hot. The perspiration streamed from Standon's face and arms, he swept webs aside with his head, and he felt that he scarcely could breathe.

Now Doña Inez took a little electric torch from her pocket and flashed that. Ahead was nothing but the narrow tunnel, as far as the light revealed it. Standon wondered how long it was, where the exit would be, and whether they would have trouble there.

Presently Doña Inez stopped. The tunnel ran on into the distance, but Doña Inez pressed against a stone in the wall, and another tiny door opened. She crept through, and the others followed her. When they all were in, the aperture was closed again.

Now she flashed her torch repeatedly, walked across to where a lamp stood on a table, and lighted it. Standon looked around him in surprise.

Here was a room about ten feet square, ventilated in some mysterious manner, since it had no window. The table and half a dozen chairs was all the furniture. In one corner was a box filled with food, a keg of water beside it, a few plates and cups. In another corner were packages that Standon knew instantly for ammunition.

"You are surprised, señor?" Doña Inez asked. "You see, we have been preparing for some years.

All the work was done by trusted servants, and they are scattered now. The bandits will follow the tunnel, señor, and come up into the fresh air on the other side of the block. We turn off here, into this small room, and let them pass us. You understand?"

"But——" Standon began, and then, catching sight of the smiling señorita, remembered that he was to ask no questions.

Doña Inez laughed. "You were going to ask whether we stay here, like rats in a trap, perhaps to be buried if they wreck all the buildings in the block," she said. "We do nothing of the sort, señor. Our foes will follow the tunnel, as I have said, since they will be unable to find a break in the wall. And we shall make our escape by another way."

"Listen! They are coming!" Don Felipe said.

They pressed close to the wall to listen. At first they could hear whispers that seemed to come from a far distance, and then the voices grew plainer. They could hear José Garabito urging on his followers.

"After them, men! An extra share of loot to the men who bring them before me as prisoners. Take them alive, and we'll make sport of them."

They were coming along the tunnel, slowly, cautiously, probably with torches that smoked and made things disagreeable for them. Now those inside the little room could hear them plainly as they talked to one another and cursed the underground trail.

"I shall have some sport," Don Felipe said. "Wait until they are opposite us, and then stuff your fingers

into your ears. I shall shriek at them. Be prepared!"

Don Felipe Mendoza bent closer to the wall. He waited until the voices told him that some of the bandits were just on the other side of it. And then he gave a shriek that rang through the room and the passage, a shriek like a soul in torment, that began low and went up to a high pitch and died away in a wail that was enough to strike terror to any heart, and especially to the hearts of superstitious peons.

"Scoundrels!" he called, in a harsh voice. "Back, or you die! Back, or I blow up the passage and you are buried alive!"

From the other side of the wall came a chorus of cries that revealed how frightened they were. Those in the little room could hear them start a rush backward.

Then they heard José Garabito yelling his commands at them, urging them on again, telling them what cowards they were.

"Murderers and thieves!" Don Felipe shouted. "This is an evil spirit warning you of your peril! José Garabito's scum! Your hour is at hand!"

More cries came from the other side of the wall. Garabito was nearer now, and a single shot sounded, showing what he had done to one frightened peon who had tried to go back. Standon could picture what was taking place in that narrow tunnel where two men could not pass. He could see the frightened men using their knives on one another, trying to cut



their way to safety, see wounded men dropping to the ground and so choking the tunnel more.

And then they knew from the sounds that the men were fleeing straight ahead, since they could not go back. They were running on through the passage, trying to get to the open air and safety, fear in their hearts and dread of death in their blackened souls. Don Felipe Mendoza leaned against the stone wall, his hands against his sides, and laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks. Doña Inez and the señorita were smiling at what he had done.

"An excellent jest!" Don Felipe said. "The superstitious wretches! They will slay one another to get to the air again."

He stepped across to the water keg, poured some water into cups, after cleansing them, and offered the drink to the ladies. Then he drank with Standon, and put the cups back on the keg.

"I suppose," said Don Felipe Mendoza, "that it were best for us to continue our journey. The town is aroused by this time, and the bandits are at their foul work. We have a long ride before us, and the night will be short for it, even if we are not interrupted. May the saints aid us this night!"

Now Don Felipe himself took the lead, an electric torch in his hand. Doña Inez followed him, and the señorita followed her, and it remained for Standon to close the rear.

On the other side of the little room, Don Felipe pressed against the wall and caused a door to open. They passed into another tunnel, and the door was

closed behind them. Then Don Felipe led the way, and the others followed silently.

For some three hundred yards they traveled—at least Standon judged so—now making a turning, now descending a few feet and now going up again. Finally they came to what seemed a dead end of the tunnel, and Don Felipe stopped.

"The unpleasant part of the journey is before us," he said. "We enter here an abandoned sewer, which we will follow to a certain place, and there reach the open air again. This connection was made years ago, as Doña Inez has said, and for just such an emergency. Were it not for the tunnel, we should have died to-night in the house. It is a fortunate thing."

Standon knew that he was thinking of the women as he spoke. He watched with interest while Don Felipe, handing the torch to Doña Inez, worked with his hands and tore away two big stones in the wall. A wave of foul air rushed at them, and they stepped through and into the old sewer.

The flashing torch showed them gigantic rats fleeing from them into the darkness. The little señorita pressed against Standon and shivered, and he clasped her hand reassuringly. Battle she might watch, wounds she might dress, but rats frightened her. Steel streaked with womanly instincts and traits, Standon thought.

They went forward as swiftly as they could, eager to get to the open air. They brushed against spider webs, plowed through deep dust that rose in clouds that almost choked them. Not the faintest sound

came to them except that which they made themselves—their stumbling steps, their deep breathing. None of them spoke.

Don Felipe continually flashed the electric torch, showing the way. Señorita Bianca still let Standon clasp her hand. Once he picked her up as they were forced to wade through seepage, and once when they were obliged to make their way over a small cave-in where rough rocks strewed the sewer's floor.

Standon judged that they had traveled at least half a mile when Don Felipe suddenly stopped and raised his hand for silence. He gave the electric flashlight to Doña Inez, and reached up and grasped the edge of an old manhole.

He tugged at it, and finally it gave a trifle. He raised it a couple of inches, and the refreshing air rushed in, for which they all were grateful.

"Silence!" Don Felipe whispered.

Bracing himself against the wall of the sewer, and with Standon to help him, he raised the side of the manhole a foot and put up his head. For a moment he watched and listened, and then put his head down again.

"I believe we are fortunate," he whispered. "There seems to be nobody in the vicinity. This manhole is in a side street, you see, and there is no light here. But we must continue to be very cautious, for all that."

Now Standon braced him again, and he crawled out and lifted the manhole covering to one side without making the slightest noise. Standon lifted out Doña Inez, and when she was safe on the ground

beside Don Felipe, he lifted out the little señorita. Then Mendoza put down his hand, and Standon grasped it and struggled out into the fresh air himself.

Don Felipe put back the manhole covering, and for a time they crouched close to a wall in the darkness, wiping the perspiration from their faces and drinking in the fresh air. Then Don Felipe led the way along the wall to the nearest street.

They went cautiously, the men holding their automatics ready for instant use. From the distance came the shrieks and cries of the mob, and, as they reached the dark street and got from behind the wall, they could see that already the sky was red. Fires had been started by the bandits in half a dozen sections of the city.

Down the street they slipped, seeing nobody. The houses they passed were dark. Standon knew there were terrified people inside them, waiting fearfully for what was to come. Nobody felt safe, he knew. A disgruntled servant allied with the bandits were enough to cause the downfall and destruction of an aristocratic house, the looting of it, the slaying of its men and the theft of its women, unless they took death upon themselves first.

They turned a corner, and came into another dark, narrow side street, and down this they went, Don Felipe still leading, until they reached a tiny plaza. Around the plaza they went, coming finally to a sort of blind alley, and into this they crept, and after a time came to where four horses were tethered to iron rings set in a wall.

"Thank the saints that nobody has found the horses," Doña Inez said. "Now we can ride for it."

They mounted swiftly, and again Don Felipe Mendoza led the way. They did not ride toward the north, but toward the south, since they already were near the edge of the city. They went slowly at first, stopping now and then to listen, fearful that they might ride into a band of revolutionists coming into the city to join in the battle and looting.

They were free of the town, and the horses went into a gallop. They made a great circle, following little-used roads, and so went around the town and reached the road that ran toward the north and the border.

Now they stopped at the crest of a hill, sheltered against a ledge of rock, and looked back at Chihuahua. In every section of the town fires were raging, and the breeze carried to their ears the sounds of firing, shouting, the din of battle. What they could not hear, they could imagine.

"'Tis a sorry night for Chihauhua," Don Felipe Mendoza said. "What a country this could be, if we only had enduring peace! But the great haciendas are in ruins, mines are closed down, fields go untilled. And we of Mexico have brought it upon ourselves, that is the worst of it. It is not as though a foreign foe was wrecking our country. We ourselves are wrecking it. Some day Mexico will emerge from the fire, triumphant, and take her proper place in the world. But there is a long trail to be followed before that happy day!"

Then Don Felipe turned his back to the suffering

city and started toward the north again, Doña Inez riding beside him; and Standon and the Señorita Bianca Flores rode a short distance behind, saying nothing, alert always.

Don Felipe stopped at the crest of every hill, at the bottom of every valley, and listened for sounds of approaching travelers. But they were fortunate in meeting nobody on the highway. Once they heard horsemen on a connecting road, but did not see them, and remained silent in the darkness until they had ridden on toward the town.

"I was afraid we would have several encounters," Don Felipe said. "But I suppose all the scoundrels were in Chihuahua early, to join in the dastardly work. Yet we are a long way from our destination, and there is danger yet."

The mist was thick again, and chill, and Standon removed his coat and buttoned it around the señorita's shoulders, despite her objections. He explained that he was used to changes in the climate, that for more than a year he had lived outdoors, sleeping beneath the stars or in the rain with scarcely any covering.

Mile after mile they traveled through the billows of fog, now and then stopping, alarmed, at some sudden sound, then creeping forward again. At times they galloped along a safe stretch; at other times they approached a curve with extreme caution, fearful of an ambush. And so they rode throughout the night.



## CHAPTER VI

### IN THE HILLS

TOWARD morning the mist cleared away and the moonlight revealed the landscape, the rolling hills dotted with uncertain vegetation, ruins of buildings in the distance at the heads of cañons, peon huts near the highway, dogs and pigs and fowls around them.

They were commencing to feel fatigue, especially Standon, who had not been in the saddle much the last year.

Señorita Bianca rode sleepily, nodding at times, straightening up with a bewildered air when her horse began climbing some steep grade. She had returned Standon's coat now. Don Felipe Mendoza and the señora rode a short distance ahead, and Don Felipe watched the road at the crest of every hill, while it was Standon's duty to look back whenever he had the opportunity.

After a time they came to a peculiar jumble of hills and cañons such as are to be found in places in northern Mexico, unexpected places where there is water and vegetation in abundance. Don Felipe and the señora turned from the highway, and Standon and the señorita followed.

"We go now to the hidden cañon, señor," she said.

"A hiding place?" he asked.

"One of the best in the country, señor. Don Felipe found it when he was a mere boy. Once his family owned all this land as far as a man can see, and had a wonderful hacienda here. And Don Felipe, riding one day, found the entrance to this hiding place, and told no man of it, which turned out to be fortunate."

"So we are going to hide," Standon said.

"It would not be safe, señor, to travel on to our destination during the day. There are reasons why we do not wish to meet any of José Garabito's men on the highway. It is not only that we should have to fight, it is that they might discover a secret and solve a puzzle. I shall tell you more later, señor."

"When it pleases you, señorita," Standon replied.

"For I am beginning to feel that we may trust you fully."

"You have my thanks for that kind speech, señorita. I assure you that your trust is not misplaced."

Don Felipe Mendoza was leading the way down a slope now, and it was a treacherous slope with rolling gravel, where the horses were compelled to show their sure-footedness.

At the bottom, they reached a tiny cañon, narrow and with high walls, along the bottom of which a stream trickled, and they made their way along the bed of the stream, going slowly. Standon noticed that the tracks filled again quickly with the shifting sand and gravel, and the stream was swift enough to clear quickly. Moreover, it was flowing in the direction they were taking. Standon smiled at the cleverness of the don; they were leaving no tracks behind.

He looked ahead and saw a wall of rock. It was a sort of pocket, Standon thought. They could defend themselves easily there, if forced to do so, but by the same token they would have no way out.

But he had made a mistake. When they reached the wall of rock he saw an opening like the mouth of a cave, large enough to admit a horse and man. Without speaking, Don Felipe Mendoza rode into the opening with the señora behind him, and disappeared in the darkness ahead.

"Follow me, señor, and let your horse pick his way," Señorita Bianca said. "And it would be better, I think, to bend your head. You are very tall, señor, and your head may bump the ceiling."

She laughed and disappeared, and Standon gave his horse the rein and bowed his head as he had been told. Even then it scraped the roof of the cave now and then, and he was forced to be very careful.

And then he saw daylight ahead, and presently they rode out into the open air again. The cave was not a cave, but a tunnel cut by nature through the solid rock of the hill. Now they found themselves in a sort of cup not more than two hundred yards in diameter. There was a trickling stream that flowed across the cup and disappeared into the mountain, and long grass grew in profusion. The walls of the cup were at least two hundred feet high, and a single glance told Standon that no man could scale them.

"Here we are, señor!" Don Felipe said, getting down from his horse. "Is it not a wonder of a place? Few living men know of it, I can assure you. Two men could defend it against an army. There is

no entrance except that tunnel. And no man could climb up or down the sides."

"A good place," Standon agreed.

"Here are water and grass, and we have a cache of food and ammunition here also. This place has been prepared for some time, señor. We never know what is coming in these turbulent days. Get down, señor, and aid the señorita. Here we spend the day, and after nightfall we continue on our journey. One shall stand guard continually until we are ready to depart. I'll take the first guard, señor, at the mouth of the tunnel."

"Allow me to do that, Don Felipe," Standon said. "You have ridden as far as I have, and, if you'll pardon me, you are a bit older. Take your rest now."

"Ha! Still a caballero!" Don Felipe exclaimed. "Your intentions are excellent, Señor Standon, but it may not be. I can guard and rest in a measure at the same time, knowing the place well. Then I can get some sleep while you stand the last guard. In that way, señor, I shall be the fresh one to-night when we start forward again, and that is necessary, since I know the way and must be on the alert. To-night will be the dangerous time, señor."

"I understand, and it is a good plan," Standon replied.

"So rest, señor—sleep. Remain here with the ladies. You'll relieve me at noon."

Don Felipe went to a pile of rocks near the side of the flowing stream, tossed away a few boulders, and exposed a cache of rifles and ammunition. He took a rifle, tossed another to Standon, indicated the boxes

of cartridges, and hurried toward the tunnel entrance. There he turned to wave at them, and then plunged into the darkness.

The women had made themselves as comfortable as possible on the grass, using their saddle blankets and coats. Standon made himself a place and stretched himself thankfully. He had not realized how tired he was.

He grinned as he thought of the landlord at the little *posada*, who had tried to warn him that there was trouble coming. The landlord probably would come to the decision that Señor John Standon had met with disaster, and would seize his pack. Standon grinned again when he thought of that. Aside from his beloved revolver, the pack consisted of dirty clothes and a few battered cooking utensils and worthless ore samples. The landlord would profit little by seizing it.

Doña Inez prepared to go to sleep at once, but the little señorita made it plain that she wished to talk to John Standon first.

"How do you like the adventure so far?" she asked.

"I have no complaint to make," he said.

"And you are not curious at all?"

"To a certain extent, naturally. But I am not letting my curiosity bother me," Standon replied, laughing a bit. "I am in the hands of my friends, you see."

"Thank you, señor. Just before he went into the tunnel to stand guard, Don Felipe said that I might

tell you a few things. That means that he trusts you."

"And do you not?"

"Certainly, since I am going to tell you those few things, señor. We have to travel a distance equal to that we have traveled already. Then we come to a stop at a place up in the foothills, where there are some native huts and a network of caves. Some of the caves are known to all, and some—are not."

"I understand," laughed Standon.

"Up in the hills from this place, señor, there is another cup in the mountains similar to this, only some larger. In that place are about thirty men, besieged. They have been there for more than six months."

"What is this?" Standon asked, showing sudden interest.

"José Garabito, as you have been told, has a special hatred for persons of good birth, breeding, or station in life. When he gathered his band of thugs, he overran this north country, señor. He burned the buildings of all the haciendas and made life unsafe for all decent people. There was nothing for them to do except run away, else stay and fight it out. And thirty men—it was fifty at first, señor—could not be expected to do much against almost a thousand."

"I understand."

"So the most of the women and children were sent across the border to the States, with what valuables remained to them; and the men went up into that



cup in the hills. José Garabito's camp, you see, is just below the cup."

"What followed?" Standon asked.

"At every opportunity, these men swept out of their little cup and took what toll they could. It infuriated Garabito, and he tried to exterminate them. But three men could defend the entrance of that cup against Garabito's entire army. He tried it, señor, until he had lost many men, and then he decided that some other plan must be followed if he was to succeed.

"So he decided to starve them out. They could not have supplies that would last forever, Garabito thought, and certainly they would run out of ammunition in time. But Garabito did not know many things, señor. When they went into the cup, they moved their great quantities of tea, coffee, sugar, salt and pepper, salted and prepared meats. And up there are wild vegetables, and an abundance of pure water, and birds that may be shot for fresh meat.

"So there was no danger of them starving, señor. And whenever they could, they swept out and surprised the bandits, sometimes killing only a few guards, sometimes setting fire to the huts, and once they burned one of Garabito's storehouses. Garabito has sworn to kill them all, and he is wondering how they get their ammunition, for they use vast quantities of it."

"That is what I was wondering," Standon said.

"And you are not to know just yet, señor. When you do know, perhaps you will laugh at the simplicity of it. And, you see, the movements of Garabito's



force are spied upon, too, and word sent to those in the cup in the same mysterious way."

"Ah!" Standon said, in a low tone. "I begin to see. Don Felipe, your aunt, you—you deliver the information."

The Señorita Bianca pouted prettily. "I am the most important," she said. "Don Felipe and my aunt must remain under cover, for they are known to the bandits, and were they captured——" She stopped, seemed to shiver for an instant. "But they do not know me, señor. Or, rather, they know me for a half-witted native girl. You see, señor, I live in one of the huts, and a hunchback named Carlos, long with our family, also supposed to be a half-wit, lives in another hut near me. These superstitious bandits, señor, think it ill luck to mistreat a half-wit or a hunchback. They curry our favor."

"Quite a plot!" Standon said, laughing.

"And so I am a herder of turkeys."

"A turkey herder!" Standon gasped.

"Is it not in a good cause? I herd my turkeys through the brush and over the hillsides, and so mingle with these bandits and listen when they talk. And so we pick much valuable information off their lips, and convey it to the men in the cup in the hills."

"But it is dangerous!"

"Not unless they discover my real identity, señor. And they must not do that at all costs, or those in the cup would suffer. I gather the information, and I forward the ammunition, as you shall be told later. I come and go as I please. We have been carrying the

ammunition out from Chihuahua, of course, traveling as we are this time."

"I should think it would be doubly dangerous for your turkeys."

"Ah, señor, you do not understand. José Garabito would shoot down the man who stole one of them. He is afraid of the half-wit girl, you see, afraid that if he mistreats me his fortune will turn bad. And, besides, it is his policy to strike the rich and powerful only. He never lets his men steal from the poor or harm them. That is how he gathers his strength. I and my turkeys are as safe as anything could be, señor. Yet it is dangerous, of course. If José Garabito ever discovered the truth, and got his hands upon me——"

Again she stopped and shivered, and Standon saw a momentary look of horror in her face. Undoubtedly she had seen what had happened to other persons Garabito had captured.

"You see, señor, everything depends upon the truth being kept a close secret. You can see what it would mean to us if Garabito found us out."

"You need not fear for me, señorita. I'll keep the secret, and help you in any way that I can."

"Thanks, señor! I knew you'd say that!"

"It would be a pleasure for me to meet José Garabito again, with the odds even."

"Then you'll have to catch him off guard. The coward does not like even odds, señor."

"Perhaps I'll get the chance!" Standon said. "If I do, I'll remember a few things I've heard."

"I hope so, señor. And now I am going to sleep,

and it would be best for you to do the same. You have to stand guard throughout the long afternoon, remember."

She turned away from him and made herself comfortable, and Standon stretched out on the grass again, with the murmur of the stream in his ears, and thought over what she had told him, wondering at her courage and her ability as an actress.

A turkey herder! A girl of the peon class! And he had seen her in that magnificent house in Chihuahua, dressed like a princess, acting the part of a gentlewoman, yet ready and willing to dress a wound! And then he fell asleep.

He awoke to find her face over him, to find her smiling at him and laughing a bit, and shaking at his shoulder.

"You sleep like the dead, señor," she told him. "You would have slept all day if it had not been for me. It is time for you to have some coffee and bread, and then to relieve Don Felipe Mendoza on guard. Don Felipe cannot have coffee, you see, until you relieve him."

Standon sprang to his feet and hurried to the stream, where he bathed his face and washed the sleep from his eyes. The cold water was refreshing, bracing.

Doña Inez had been making coffee, and she gave Standon a large pan of it, which he gulped, though it was so hot that it brought tears to his eyes. He ate the bread thankfully, for he was ravenous. And then he took up the rifle, filled his pockets with cartridges, and looked toward Señorita Bianca.

"Now I am ready to relieve Don Felipe and do my share of the guard duty," he said.

"You go straight through the tunnel, señor," she replied, smiling at him again, "taking due care not to bump your head. There are no branches to the tunnel. You start walking, and you continue until you see daylight at the other end. Don Felipe will be there, watching the cañon."

Standon plunged into the darkness of the natural tunnel and made his way forward slowly, one arm bent before him to protect his face in case he came to an abrupt turn. The tunnel seemed twice as long as it had been when they had ridden in. But after a time he saw a faint disk of light far ahead, and as he advanced it grew wider, and then he could see the ragged edge of the tunnel's mouth.

Don Felipe Mendoza stepped from behind a rock to greet him.

"Señor Standon, I am glad to see you," he said. "This is monotonous work, and I am hungry."

"Doña Inez has some excellent coffee," Standon said.

"Don't I know it?" the don asked. "She always makes excellent coffee when we stop here. It is one of my reasons for stopping at every opportunity. But to business, señor! It is best to make yourself comfortable at the edge of this rock. You can see the length of the cañon without being seen. Smoke if you like, only be careful."

"I understand."

"Any man who approaches will have to do so from down the cañon, following the creek as we did, señor.

You understand how necessary it is that we are not bothered?"

"The señorita has told me some things, Don Felipe, and you may be sure that I understand."

"Good! At such a time we must forget mercy, señor. You may be sure that any man who approaches along the cañon is an enemy. You understand? In such case, señor, it will be safest to shoot first and ascertain identities afterward."

"You may depend upon me, Don Felipe."

They shook hands, and then Don Felipe Mendoza plunged into the blackness of the tunnel, hurrying in the direction of hot coffee and sleep. Standon heard the sounds of the don's steps die away, and made himself comfortable, rolled and lighted a cigarette. Then, his hat tilted over his eyes, he looked down the narrow cañon, now burning in the sun, looked it over carefully and let its appearance stamp itself on his brain, so that the least moving speck would attract his attention instantly.

Then began the monotonous watching. Standon glanced down the cañon until the glare of it pained his eyes, seeing only the rocky walls, the glistening stream, the scant vegetation that offered relief here and there.

"A fine place for lizards and rattlesnakes," he growled to himself. "No self-respecting revolutionist would follow us here."

But he remembered how Garabito would like to get his hands upon them, and how he probably would reward those of his men who made the capture. He remembered how fortunate they had been through the

long night to meet nobody on the highway, and wondered whether luck would be with them during the night to come.

Hour followed hour, and Standon changed his position frequently, and rolled and smoked innumerable cigarettes, and now and then took a drink from the canteen the señorita had given him. He longed for night, and action. Sitting in the darkness at the side of a rock and peering out into a burning cañon was tiresome, he decided.

Then there came to him, on the faint breeze that had begun to stir, the sounds of an animal's hoofs beating against the hard road in the distance.

Standon reached for his rifle, extinguished his cigarette, and suddenly was very alert. The sounds came as though from a great distance at first, and then seemed to be getting nearer.

Like an Indian warrior on watch, Standon braced himself against the side of the big rock motionless, chin lifted and eyes narrowed as he watched the bed of the cañon.

The beating of hoofs stopped, and it was silent again. Still Standon watched, for from the sounds he guessed that the animal had been stopped near the head of the cañon.

And then, in the far distance, he saw a moving black speck where none had been before. Standon bent forward more, his eyes narrowed until they were but two tiny slits that seemed to send forth flakes of fire. He forgot everything around him and concentrated all his attention on the moving black speck.

Nearer it came, and grew larger rapidly. There



was no uncertainty now, a man was approaching the mouth of the tunnel. He still was at a great distance, and Standon could not make out what manner of man he was, but it was certainly a man.

Standon remembered Don Felipe's instructions: If any man came it would be a foe, and to shoot first and make an investigation afterward. That was not Standon's method of giving battle, but he realized that it was best in present circumstances. He and Don Felipe were not alone in danger, there were Doña Inez and the señorita.

Standon looked to his rifle and found it ready. Then he concentrated his attention on the approaching man again. His actions were peculiar. He was following the stream, yet dodging from side to side of it, taking cover behind rocks and clumps of brush and waiting a moment before coming on.

Those actions decided Standon that the man was an enemy. He watched carefully, the rifle held ready. He could see the approaching man better now; he was dressed like a peon in tattered clothing, with a battered sombrero on his head, and he wore no shoes. A spy, Standon decided, one of José Garabito's men trailing them.

It looked as though he had guessed the truth, for at intervals the man in the cañon stopped and peered at the ground as though searching for tracks. Again he took cover behind a rock and peered around the edge of it, and for some time he watched the mouth of the tunnel. Then he came on.

Standon prepared for his grim business now. It was in his mind to shoot to bring the man down

rather than to kill. He selected a clump of brush at some distance down the cañon, guessing that the man either would dart toward it to hide, or else go into the stream and around it. When he reached that clump of brush, Standon would fire.

Again the man in the cañon dodged across the stream, took cover behind a rock, waited a moment, and then came on. Standon raised the rifle, brought it up to his shoulder, and took a preliminary sight. He wanted to pride himself afterward on an excellent shot, so he tried to gauge the distance and the wind. It was his object to send a bullet through the man's leg and so render him less dangerous. And then, probably, information could be extracted from him by Don Felipe.

The man in the cañon came on again, bending forward and running swiftly and silently. He spashed into the stream, crossed it and splashed out again, and started toward the clump of brush, as Standon had anticipated.

Again Standon's eyes narrowed, and he bent his head to sight the rifle accurately. The running figure in the cañon was almost at the clump of brush now. John Standon held his breath, and his right hand began to contract as he squeezed the weapon. A few feet more and the man would be beside the clump of brush, and Standon would fire.

Suddenly his rifle was struck up quickly, he was half hurled back against the rock; and Señorita Bianca, her face white, standing beside him.

"Senor!" she gasped. "Would you slay my best friend?"

## CHAPTER VII

### CARLOS TAKES THE LEAD

FOR the first time in her life, Señorita Bianca Flores found herself interested more than usual in a man. Heretofore she had looked upon men as amiable animals supposed to be courteous, gallant, and of instant service to women, looked upon them as representatives of a sex and not individuals.

After Standon had gone into the tunnel to stand guard, and Don Felipe Mendoza had eaten and gone to sleep, the señorita prowled around the banks of the murmuring stream for a time and then decided that life suddenly had grown monotonous.

She helped Doña Inez make bundles of ammunition to be carried with them when they went on at night, and, that work done, found that she had nothing else to do. So she decided that it would be a charitable thing to enter the tunnel, go to where Standon was on guard, and talk to him for a time, so he would not be lonesome.

She entered the dark tunnel and slipped along it silently, guiding herself with one hand against the rock wall; and in time she came to where she could see the daylight ahead, and once she saw Standon as he bent around the end of the big rock and looked off down the cañon.

The little señorita stopped for a moment and re-

garded him, and then decided to slip upon him, surprise him, chaff him afterward about how poor a guard he was. It was not difficult, of course, since John Standon knew there were no foes behind him, and also had his attention concentrated on the man approaching down the cañon.

Nearer and nearer she crept, and presently she, too, saw the man in the cañon and stopped to watch, fearful that there was going to be trouble, ready to run back through the tunnel and carry the alarm to Don Felipe Mendoza.

She narrowed her eyes, shaded them with her hands, and watched the man as he darted from rock to rock and from brush to brush. Then she recognized him, and darted forward just in time to prevent John Standon firing.

"It—it is Carlos," she said. "Thank the saints that I happened to be here."

"Carlos?" Standon asked.

"The hunchback of whom I spoke. And you might have slain him, señor."

"Don Felipe said that any man who approached would be a foe, and that it was best to shoot first and ascertain identities afterward. And I was not going to shoot to kill, but only to bring him down."

"Carlos!" she gasped again. "I wonder what brings him here! There may be grave trouble."

She pressed past Standon, ran to the mouth of the tunnel, and shouted to the approaching man.

"Carlos! Come on, Carlos! It is safe!"

He gave a glad cry as he looked up and caught sight of her, a cry like that of a pleased animal,

Standon thought, and then ran like the wind toward the mouth of the tunnel. He caught the señorita's hand and kissed it, still making the little sounds of pleasure deep in his throat. And then he caught sight of Standon, who had stepped forward, the rifle still held in the crook of his arm, and suddenly he snarled and sprang backward, whipping a knife from his belt.

"Carlos!" the señorita commanded; and the hunchback stopped just as he was preparing to throw the knife. "This is Señor Standon, who helped us escape from the city. Look at him, Carlos, and tell me whether he is good."

Standon stood like a rock as the hunchback approached, bent forward, holding up his grotesque head, his eyes blazing. He looked Standon over from feet to head, and Standon stood moveless beneath the scrutiny. Then the hunchback stepped toward the señorita, and gave a horrible grin.

"Good man!" he announced.

"Oh, I am so glad!" Señorita Bianca cried. "Carlos never makes a mistake in his estimation of a person, señor. He has an uncanny faculty for reading a human being. If Carlos says that you are a good man, then you are, and I am pleased that he has confirmed my own judgment."

"I am glad that I have passed the test," Standon replied dryly.

"And why are you here, Carlos?" she demanded, turning toward the hunchback again. "You had orders to remain behind and watch things. What is your explanation?"

The hunchback looked toward Standon, and scratched his head as though uncertain.

"You may speak freely, Carlos," the señorita said. "Señor Standon is one of us."

"Nearly all of them went to the town," he said.

"We know that. And they attacked Chihuahua, and began to burn and loot. We had difficulty in escaping."

"Ben Tarker and some fifty men remained behind, señorita, to watch those in the cup in the hills."

"Well?"

"And they drank much, señorita, and they were looking for you to dance for them, a good luck dance, they said. They asked me."

"And what did you tell?"

"As you had instructed, señorita: that you had gone back into the hills to visit an aunt who was ill, and that you would return in two or three days."

"That was well, Carlos. They did not act suspicious?"

"No, señorita. I herded the turkeys as well as I could, but kept them in the little corral most of the time, and fed and watered them there. And Ben Tarker and the men drank some more, and grew bold. They were angry, you see, because José Garabito had not taken them all with him to join in the fighting and the loot, though José Garabito promised to fetch them a share."

"Well?" she asked.

"And so Ben Tarker thought it would be a great thing if he and his fifty men could attack those in the cup in the hills, and perhaps kill or capture all of



them before José Garabito and the others returned from the town."

"They tried?"

"Si, señorita, they tried!" the hunchback said. "And they lost some fifteen in dead and wounded in the trying. But they were drunk enough to keep at it, and they forced those in the cup to use much ammunition. And so word came down to me that more ammunition must be had as soon as possible, and there was none for me to send, señorita. Moreover——"

"Enough!" she cried, stopping him. "Senor Standon is our trusted friend, but he does not know everything, especially how we send ammunition to those in the cup. We go forward to-night, Carlos, and take some ammunition to them."

"And so I was not certain what to do," Carlos continued, "and I got my mule and started here. I thought perhaps you would be here if you had escaped from the town, and I found your tracks and followed them into the cañon. But I was not certain, so I approached carefully, señorita."

"And Señor Standon almost shot you," she said. "Have you heard anything else, Carlos, while we have been gone?"

"I have listened well, and have heard many things, señorita. Ben Tarker talks very much when he is drunk with mescal. They are going to bring prisoners from Chihuahua, señorita, all the aristocrats they can find. And then——"

"Torture?" she asked.

"Many things have been planned by them, seño-

rita. I think it is their intention to celebrate the victory by torturing the prisoners, both men and women, in every way they can. I—I was afraid, señorita, knowing that you were in Chihuahua with Doña Inez, and that Don Felipe was away."

"Don Felipe is here with us, Carlos; he escaped from the city with us," Bianca replied. "He is sleeping now. I'll take you to him at once, and Señor Standon will remain here at the mouth of the tunnel on guard."

She favored Standon with a smile, and then clasped the hunchback by the hand and started with him into the tunnel, soon disappearing in the darkness. Standon, making himself as comfortable as possible again, rolled and lighted a cigarette and continued his vigil, watching as the shadows lengthened on one side of the cañon and the line of sun on the other side grew higher.

He was shaken a bit to think how near he had been to shooting the hunchback. It would have been enough to shoot down a man not an enemy, but firing at a half-wit cripple was unthinkable. He blessed the señorita for having been in time to stop him.

There was nothing more during the afternoon to break the monotony of the guard. The lizards scampered over the rocks and a few birds dropped beside the tumbling stream for water, but that was all. And as it began to get dark, Don Felipe Mendoza came through the tunnel alone and hurried to Standon's side.

"You are to go in and have some coffee and bread,

señor," Don Felipe said. "Then you'll come out with the others, and the horses. It will be dark by that time, and we can start for our destination. Bianca tells me that you heard what Carlos had to say. That means, señor, that we have a double task. We must supply the men in the cup with ammunition and news, and we must make an effort to save any prisoners José Garabito brings from Chihuahua."

"I almost shot the hunchback, Don Felipe."

"So Bianca told me, and I am glad that she was in time to stop you. I never dreamed of Carlos coming here when I gave you those orders. It was an emergency that brought him, of course. That hunchback with his poor wits is of great value to us. He is more clever than men think. And he is loyal, would die for us. He tells me, Señor Standon, that you are a good man."

"I am glad that I meet with his approval," Standon said, laughing. "What becomes of Carlos when we start to ride toward the north to-night?"

"Carlos will lead the way," Don Felipe said. "He can see in the dark, that boy, and hear things other men swear do not exist. He will go some distance ahead."

"But his mount?"

"Carlos has no use for a horse, señor. The hunchback rides a wild mule that no other man can mount. He tears along the highway or over the hills at a rate of speed almost unbelievable. Carlos and his wild mule are known to the entire countryside."

Then Standon hurried through the tunnel, for he was hungry, and found hot coffee and some food

waiting for him. Carlos squatted near him on the ground as he ate, looking at him and saying nothing, as though studying him. "Good man!" he grunted finally, and went to attend to the horses.

"I can't stand much more of this flattery," Standon told Bianca, laughing at her.

"Carlos never makes a mistake," she said. "If he says that you are a good man, you must be one."

"I'll try to live up to his estimation of me," said Standon.

He helped saddle the horses and fasten on the packs of ammunition that they were to carry. And then they put the rifles away in the cache, for they were to be left there and only the automatics carried on the journey.

It was almost dark now, and they started for the tunnel; Doña Inez leading the way and Carlos coming last, holding to Standon's saddle. In the tunnel Doña Inez flashed her electric torch as a signal to Don Felipe that they were coming, and when they reached the entrance to the little cañon, the don was waiting for them, his rifle already cached there.

"We'll wait half an hour longer," Don Felipe said. "Carlos, you will go ahead, get your mule, and meet us when we come up from the cañon. Be sure that there is nobody on the highway."

Carlos slipped away without a word, and soon was lost from sight. The night was descending rapidly now. Soon nothing could be seen but the glow of Standon's cigarette. He was taking advantage of the wait to have a last smoke. Perhaps on the high-

way Don Felipe would not allow it. A flaming match may be seen a long way on a dark night.

At the end of the half hour they set out in single file, Don Felipe leading and Standon being the last, letting the horses pick their own way through the shallow stream and up the cañon.

Presently, they began to climb up the treacherous slope. Soon they were above the cañon, and winding through the rocks and clumps of brush; and then Carlos came to them out of the night, and they halted.

"There is nobody on the highway, Don Felipe," he reported. "We may meet with somebody, of course."

"You will ride ahead on your mule," Don Felipe directed. "Keep some distance ahead, Carlos, and be alert. Should anybody approach, hurry back and warn us. We'll watch behind."

"Si, señor," Carlos said.

Doña Inez flashed her electric torch to make sure that the pack of ammunition was adjusted properly, and by the light, Standon could see the mule, a gigantic, wild creature without saddle or bridle. A piece of rope around the animal's neck seemed to serve Carlos as well as an entire harness. He sprang from the ground to the mule's back, spoke to the beast softly, and disappeared again. They followed, reached the main road, and turned toward the north. The second half of the long, perilous journey had begun.

As upon the night before, Don Felipe rode ahead with Doña Inez, and Standon behind with the señorita. Down a long hill they went, and up another

long slope, and then for some distance they rode on the level, the hill breeze blowing against them.

Señorita Bianca was humming a song beneath her breath, and Standon marveled at it. It was almost beyond belief that a woman could sing under the circumstances, when they were liable to an encounter and capture at any moment, and when capture meant so much.

They talked but little. Now and then they would stop and listen. Carlos, a couple of hundred yards ahead on the mule, was making no effort to keep quiet. The señorita explained it to Standon.

"Above all, José Garabito and his men must trust Carlos, and must trust me," she said. "If Carlos meets any of them on the road, he will talk to them. I must not be seen, of course, for they would wonder how the poor, half-witted turkey herder came to be riding such a fine horse. And Don Felipe, Doña Inez, you, none of you must be seen. If they found any of us in the company of Carlos, they would begin to suspect him. And then our good work would be at an end, señor. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Standon said.

"Should we meet some of them, we could not even fight, señor. For they would know that Carlos had been guiding us, their foes. The only safe way would be to slay them all, if we had an encounter. And even then their dead bodies would tell a tale to José Garabito. That bandit is clever at thinking things out. You see how careful we must be?"

"But, when we reach our destination, how can



Don Felipe, Doña Inez, and I exist without their knowing of our presence!" Standon asked.

"I was under the impression," she whispered in reply, "that the señor was to ask no questions."

"I beg your pardon!"

"But you'll have your answer, señor, as soon as we arrive."

Then they caught up with Carlos, who had stopped his mule on the crest of a hill.

"What is it?" Don Felipe whispered.

"Somebody comes," Carlos replied.

"A horseman?"

"Si, señor!"

"I can hear nothing."

"Somebody comes," Carlos repeated.

In silence, they waited. Soon, in the far distance, they could hear the beating of a horse's hoofs; and then they heard a ribald song howled in a raucous voice.

"Ben Tarker!" Carlos whispered.

"We must take to the side of the road until he passes," Don Felipe commanded. "We are to make no move against him, Señor Standon, for then he would know that Carlos was allied with his foes. We can take no chances now, you see."

"I understand, Don Felipe. The señorita has explained all that to me."

They guided their horses off the road and into a tiny depression a short distance away, where there was a quantity of brush behind which they could hide. It was so dark that a man could not see a dozen feet,

but Ben Tarker might strike a match and observe them.

Safe off the road, they dismounted and stepped to their horses' heads, to hold their nostrils and prevent them from whinnying. Ben Tarker was approaching rapidly, singing a drunken song at the top of his voice. He struck the bottom of the hill and slowed down his horse, judging from the sounds they heard. His singing died away until it was but a murmur.

Carlos suddenly kicked his mule in the ribs and dashed forward. And he stopped just as quickly, with as much noise as possible. They heard Ben Tarker curse, and knew that he was approaching carefully, probably ready to fire.

"Who's there?" he cried.

"It is I, señor; it is Carlos."

"By all the dead saints! The imbecile and his wild mule out here in the hills at night!" Ben Tarker rode closer and made an inspection. "What are you doing so far from home?" he demanded.

"I did not feel right, señor, and I rode out here to talk to the stars," Carlos replied.

"Ugh!" Ben Tarker grunted. "It makes me shiver to come near you. Talking to the stars, are you? Keep away from me with that wild mule. Son of the evil one, he is."

"This is a good mule."

"I'm not arguing against it!" Ben Tarker interrupted quickly. "He is a splendid mule! I'm treatin' you and your mule decently, hunchback, so cast none of your wicked spells on me. You're not human! See five miles and hear ten, the peons say. I'm your

friend, see? So don't go to puttin' any curse on me, Carlos. And, tell me, do you hear José Garabito and his men coming back from Chihuahua with prisoners and loot?"

"I heard nothing from the south."

"Um!" Ben Tarker grunted. "They should have been back before this. Leavin' me out of all the fun, I suppose. I came ridin' out to meet them and hear what fortune they had. Ought to be here by this time! You goin' to ride home, Carlos?"

"Si, señor!"

"Didn't pass anybody on the highway?"

"Nobody, señor."

"If you see any aristocrats running around the hills, Carlos, let your mule have a kick at them. Understand? And you keep around the camp when you get home, if you want to see some fun. If Garabito brings prisoners, there'll be fun in plenty. What became of that turkey girl?"

"Anita, señor? Did I not tell the señor that she went over the hills to see a sick aunt?"

"So you did. I was full of mescal and forgot. She's queer, that girl! Not much sense, I guess. Sick aunt, eh?"

"I think, señor, that she will return in the morning," Carlos said.

"Great turkey herder, that girl! Mind her like a bunch of trained dogs, they do. But not much sense. No! Bats in her belfry, as the Americanos say."

Señorita Bianca Flores pressed Standon's hand. "I'd like to whip the scoundrel for saying that," she

whispered to him. "No sense, indeed! Perhaps some day he'll admit I had a great deal of sense!"

"Well, I must go on down the road and meet Garabito," Ben Tarker was saying to Carlos. "Take care of yourself, hunchback. If Garabito and the men bring back a lot of loot, maybe I'll give you a present out of it."

"Thanks, señor."

"Anything in particular that your heart desires?"

"Si, señor," said Carlos. "A little doll with blue eyes and a red dress."

"Great revolution! If Garabito brings home loot, there will be no dolls with blue eyes and red dresses, nor any jumping jacks, either. That's a joke. I must tell the chief that! Those bully boys of his lootin' houses for dolls and toys, eh? Carlos, hunchback, if there are any dolls with blue eyes and red dresses, they'll be live dolls. Understand?"

He laughed raucously, and Don Felipe and Standon cursed under their breaths, and the señorita and Doña Inez gasped once at the thought Ben Tarker had expressed.

"But I'll find some bully present for you, Carlos, all the same," Ben Tarker said. "You're one of us, hunchback, and shall have a part of the loot."

Don Felipe Mendoza's horse suddenly jerked its head out of his grasp, and snorted. Don Felipe got control of the beast's nostrils again instantly. Standon grasped his automatic and prepared for instant battle.

"What was that?" Ben Tarker demanded, sud-

denly alert and cautious. "What was it, hunchback?"

"I did not hear anything, señor," Carlos replied quickly. "Perhaps it was but the breeze rushing through the brush, or one of the stars trying to talk to me."

"Um!" Ben Tarker grunted. "If you didn't hear it, with those good ears of yours, I must have imagined it. Sounded to me like the snort of a horse."

"In that case, señor, perhaps it was this big mule of mine. He is eager to be galloping along the highway, I suppose, thinking there is food at home."

Ben Tarker seemed to be undecided. Don Felipe and Standon strained their eyes to see through the darkness, strained their ears to catch the faintest sound that would tell of a move. But Ben Tarker had been drinking to excess for two days, and was not as alert as usual. The menace passed.

"Travel on, hunchback, and I'll do the same," he said. "North you go, and I go south to meet José Garabito and the men. Talkin' with the stars, eh? Wantin' a doll with blue eyes and a red dress? You make me shiver, hunchback, that you do! Off we go!"

"So be it, señor," Carlos replied.

"Don't forget to be at the party, hunchback. Garabito promised to bring some prisoners who will furnish a lot of fun."

Ben Tarker spurred his horse and galloped along the highway toward the south. He took up the ribald song in the middle of a verse and sang loudly as he rode.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PRISONERS

THEY waited until they could hear the pounding hoofs of Ben Tarker's horse no longer, and they went out into the highway again and continued toward the north, Carlos going ahead as before.

There was no further interruption, and an hour before dawn they came to the crest of a hill and saw, far ahead of them, the red pin-points of camp fires.

"We shall have to leave the horses soon and go ahead on foot," Don Felipe told Standon. "Those fires are at the edge of José Garabito's camp. When his entire force is here, there are scores of fires along the bank of the creek that winds around the base of the hills."

Standon had nothing to say, now, except that he appreciated they were running into danger and would have to be doubly cautious. Now Carlos rode just ahead of them, and they did not gallop. They came to where a creek crossed the road, and turned their horses into it, so that no tracks would be left.

For half an hour longer they rode, and then they stopped at the base of the hill, and Don Felipe whispered that they were to dismount. There was a moon now, and they kept close to the shadows. Carlos turned his mule loose and then plunged ahead



to pull aside a heap of dead brush. Standon saw a cave yawning before them.

"War makes prairie dogs of us," said Don Felipe, chuckling. "It must seem to you, Señor Standon, that we spent the greater part of our lives in caves and holes in the ground. It is fortunate, señor, that we have the caves in which to hide, fortunate that José Garabito should establish his camp here, where the hills are honeycombed with underground passages constructed by nature. The joke of it is, señor, that Garabito and his men know a few of them and think that they know all."

Doña Inez flashed her electric torch again, and they led the horses into the cave. Soon it widened and grew high, and Standon found that they had entered a large room. High in the roof was a place where the moonlight streamed through.

"An abundance of fresh air in here," Don Felipe said. "This is where we hide our horses. Carlos manages to get food and water to them during the day, and we have a barricade that we put up, so the animals cannot stray. Garabito's men never wander in this direction; they think that there is nothing here."

The horses were relieved of saddles and bridles and allowed to roam where they pleased. Carlos filled a corner of the room with dry grass, of which there was a huge pile in a smaller room adjoining. Then, under Don Felipe's direction, they took up the packages of ammunition and went out into the night again.

"It will be dawn soon, and we have no time to spare," Don Felipe said.

Carlos walked away without a word, disappeared as though he did not approve of them. Señorita Bianca walked at Standon's side, but she was very quiet. They followed the creek for a distance of a hundred yards or more, and then entered another cave, after Don Felipe had pulled away the brush that covered the entrance.

Now the electric torches were flashed again, and they hurried forward along a natural tunnel that curved and twisted like a great serpent asleep in the ground. And now the señorita seemed to regain her spirits.

"When next you see me, señor," she said, "I shall be a turkey herder. Don Felipe will make you acquainted with our underground kingdom, I suppose, and with the work that is to be done. And you are to guard me from a distance, of course."

"You may depend upon that part of it, señorita," Standon replied.

"But always you must remember that you do not know me, nor Carlos, that you have no connection at all with us. Even peril must not make you forget that, señor. The lives of the men in the little cup in the hills depend upon that. All that we are trying to do depends upon it."

"I shall remember," Standon said.

They came to where the tunnel divided, and there they stopped. Don Felipe stepped back and took the señorita's hand.

"We shall communicate in the usual manner and at the usual times, my dear," he said.

"Very well, Don Felipe."

"And may the saints guard you."

And then she kissed her aunt, and shook hands with Don Felipe and Standon, and darted quickly down one of the tunnels, disappearing in the darkness like a person sure of the footing.

The others went along the second passage. It seemed to John Standon that they traveled for a mile or more, following the twisting tunnel. And then they came to a series of underground rooms, and Don Felipe indicated that they had reached the end of their journey.

"Señor Standon," he said, "you may have the room at the right. I have the one adjoining, and the Doña Inez has a palatial apartment a short distance down the hall. A bit of sleep would not come amiss, I think. Coffee will be served when we awake, and some real food also. Do not try to go from the cave, please, without my guidance. I may say that José Garabito's headquarters is less than a hundred yards from where you now are standing."

Standon might have laughed had he not been so fatigued with the strain of their perilous journey. The don might have been assigning a guest a room in a palace, from his manner. But Standon merely bowed and went into his room, finding there a couple of blankets and a pillow. He made himself a bed, fell upon it, and was instantly asleep.

The next thing he knew Don Felipe was shaking him by an arm.

"You sleep like a man with an untroubled conscience," the don remarked.

Standon got to his feet. "Have I been asleep long?" he asked.

"It is nine o'clock in the morning. It was no more than four when you went to bed. Coffee is waiting, also food. Doña Inez has prepared it with her own fair hands. Come with me, and I'll conduct you to the toilet department. We do not happen to have hot water, but there is an abundance of cold. And we may be in hot water at that before very long."

Don Felipe Mendoza appeared to be in excellent spirits. He was chuckling again as he led Standon through the passage and to a place where a tiny stream flowed from a hole in the rock into a basin some ten feet in diameter. Standon washed his face and hands in a pottery bowl which, he knew, was a relic of prehistoric days. He had seen several such bowls taken from ancient cliff dwellings. This adventure certainly had touches of the picturesque, he thought.

Then Don Felipe conducted him to another chamber, where Doña Inez was waiting.

"The breakfast room," said the don. "You will observe a tiny hole in the roof. That lets light and air in, and lets the smoke out. It happens, señor, that the smoke emerges in a clump of dwarfed trees in a sort of depression in the earth, and Garabito's men cannot observe it. When first we established ourselves here, we worried about the smoke until we discovered the truth."

"The señorita?" Standon asked.

"Living in her hut and herding her turkeys, señor. Ah, señor, the spirit of that girl! A delicate señorita, from a family of breeding, facing dangers untold to be of service to her kind. There is no need to tell you what would happen were the truth about her discovered. José Garabito meets her, speaks to her, talks freely to his men in her presence, thinking she is nothing but a peon girl with poor wits. Bianca and Carlos! Without them we could do nothing."

"And what will be the end?" Standon asked. "Can you remain here forever sending ammunition to the men in the cup in the hills? Can they stay there forever? How will it end?"

"They take toll of Garabito's men now and then," Don Felipe replied. "And one of these days they will make a dash, do what damage they can, and ride for the border. Preparations are being made even now, señor."

"I'll be glad to fight by the side of those men," Standon said.

"And they will be proud to have you do so, señor, and undoubtedly you will get the chance, soon. Now that you have breakfasted, señor, we'll light out cigarettes and leave Doña Inez to retire and get more sleep. Allow me to conduct you to the roof garden."

"The roof garden!" Standon gasped.

"I call it that. We have a place, Señor Standon, where a man can look over José Garabito's entire

camp. You can almost see the whites of their eyes. This way, señor, if you please."

Standon found himself following the don through a narrow passage and up a steep incline. Here the air was stagnant, the heat excessive, the dust repulsive. Up and up they went, and finally came to another passage that was wider, and into which fresh air was pouring. Standon saw some light ahead, and finally they stopped before narrow slits in the rock wall.

"Look!" Don Felipe said.

Standon stepped forward and glanced through one of the slits. A hundred feet below was a level place beside the creek. Ramshackle huts and tents dotted it. Horses and mules were wandering around. Men were washing in the creek, cooking a meal, playing cards, drinking.

"Is that not a picture of an army headquarters?" Don Felipe asked, sneering a bit. "That outfit belongs to José Garabito, who calls himself the liberator of mankind. The big hut at this end is his own, señor. Up that tiny pass toward the left is where our friends are holding the fort."

"A crew of thugs!" Standon said, meaning José Garabito's men.

"Worse than thugs!" Don Felipe declared. "And now look to the right, señor. Do you see that little hut at the edge of the woods, the one with the fence before it and flowers growing around it? That, señor, is the home of Anita, the turkey herder."

"Señorita Bianca lives there?"



"She does, señor. That corral behind the hut is where she keeps the turkeys; you may see them there now. Garabito's men will not touch them. When they want turkeys to eat, he purchases them from her, letting her pick out the ones she wishes to sell. They believe, of course, in that mythical aunt; think that the aunt and her son come here once a year and help Anita take the turkeys to Chihuahua to sell in the market. The story is that Anita's father was killed in war and that her mother died soon afterward, leaving her alone except for the protection of Carlos. She even shows them her mother's grave, señor, behind the hut. Carlos manufactured the grave, and she keeps flowers growing upon it."

"But the turkeys!" Standon said. "She really herds them?"

"Between ourselves, señor, those turkeys are trained. Bianca's parents owned a great hacienda, and Bianca when a child always played with the turkey herders. She knows the tricks of the trade, you may be sure. She really herds them. Could she not, she would not fool Garabito a moment."

"And where does she herd them?" Standon asked.

"Along the creek and up the sides of the hills, señor, where there is food for the birds. She comes and goes as she pleases. Garabito has even warned her not to go too far up the pass for fear some of the men in the cup might steal her turkeys or insult her. Insult her? Ha! If Garabito only knew!"

"Then the turkeys are a good subterfuge," Standon said.

"They are more than that, señor. Pardon me if I do not explain to you now."

"I remember; I was to ask no questions."

"So much depends upon it, señor," Don Felipe said, as though making an apology.

Suddenly he bent forward and looked through one of the slits, and his exclamation caused Standon to do the same.

The men in Garabito's camp were on their feet, cheering, running to where a path curved down from the road to the creek. Down this path came a motley crew; Garabito and his men were returning from Chihuahua.

Standon judged that there must be fully five hundred in the party, and he supposed that there were others straggling along the road. He had seen some sorry-looking parties in his time, but never one like this.

At the head came Garabito himself, riding a magnificent horse that undoubtedly he had stolen. Behind him rode Ben Tarker, shrieking at the top of his voice. The men moved without any semblance of order. They rode all sorts of animals; thoroughbreds, skates, mules, ponies, donkeys.

Then came the prisoners.

Standon gasped when he saw them, and Don Felipe made a sound that expressed mingled pity and rage. Gray-haired men, erect young boys, delicate women who had been forced to walk or run, almost ready to drop with fatigue, yet trying to

hold their heads up proudly. Some were in evening dress, surprised by the bandits at their amusements. Some were in their night clothes.

Garabito's men urged them on, shrieking insults at them, laughing at their plight, prodding them, kicking at them, treating them worse than dogs.

"You see, señor?" Don Felipe Mendoza asked, in a voice that shook with rage.

"I see!" John Standon answered.

Up to this point, the adventure had not seemed real to Standon; he had been like a spectator at some melodrama. But this thing struck home; this sight brought him to a realization of actualities. Now John Standon was himself again, a fighting Texan ready to protect helpless men and battle for defenseless women.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE RESCUE

**B**EN TARKER had told his chief how he had lost some fifteen men by an assault on the force in the cup in the hills, and José Garabito had called him a fool and then dismissed the matter. Garabito did not care for the fifteen men, and he knew that the disaster would make his followers hate the aristocrats more, which was what he desired.

Now Garabito led his force into the clearing beside the creek, waved his hand at the plaudits of those who had been forced to remain behind at the camp, and shouted that he had not forgotten them, that there would be loot for all.

The column stopped, and Garabito got down from his horse. He was in front of the turkey herder's hut, and Bianca, bare-legged and in ragged clothing, with her black hair stringing down at the sides of her head, was standing at one corner of the hut watching the arrival of the bandits and their prisoners.

"Ha!" José Garabito cried. "Here is Anita, herder of turkeys, and our mascot. She must have been praying for us, since we have had such good fortune. And where is Carlos, the hunchback who talks to the stars?"

"I have not seen Carlos this morning, señor,"

Bianca replied, "I have been away, visiting my sick aunt over the hills, and but returned early this morning."

"In time to see our triumph, eh?" Garabito cried. "I have not forgotten the turkey herder. See; here is a diamond necklace worth many pecos. Take it; it is yours! Wear it around your pretty throat, herder of turkeys, and continue bringing good luck to José Garabito and his cause! Perhaps there is a fleck or two of blood upon it. I snatched it from the throat of a stout old aristocrat woman who tried to resist."

Bianca almost shuddered as she accepted the present, for she knew better than to refuse. She even managed to smile and get a sparkle into her eyes.

"And there are other presents," Garabito continued. "We have gowns for you, turkey herder; gowns of silks and satins like the aristocrat women wear. And silk stockings and shoes. Think of that! Shoes! You shall have your pick, and dress up like a lady, and then dance for us and show these aristocrats that you can look as pretty as their women and dance far better."

This was dangerous ground, Bianca knew. Some of the prisoners undoubtedly knew her, would recognize her, perhaps without thinking would betray her identity. She would have to avoid dancing before them. And, if she dressed in fine clothes, such as she had known all her life until she became a herder of turkeys for a cause, perhaps even these bandits would decide that she acted too much the lady; so much so that she must really be one.

"Señor," she said to José Garabito, "do you think that I would wear the clothes of the hated aristocrats? Ha! I spit upon them, señor! I would not let my turkeys wear them! Put the silk gowns on your mules, and it would be more becoming. And dance before them? Entertain aristocrats, señor? Is it José Garabito who asks me to do such a thing? If I dance, it will be for Señor Garabito and his men; the aristocrats are not to be allowed to look on."

Garabito laughed loudly. "There is sense in what the turkey girl says," he cried. "Very well, we'll put the silk gowns on the mules, and you need not dance except for me and my men. And tell me, herder of turkeys, what is the proper thing to do with these prisoners, think you? Here they come now, stumbling along like a lot of poor fools!"

Bianca stepped back around the corner of the hut, though seeming not to do so. She was afraid of being recognized. Among the prisoners there must be many who knew her and Doña Inez and Don Felipe. A sight of her might bring forth a word that would lead to disaster.

"Señor Garabito," she replied, "for the present I would put all the prisoners in the big cave where ammunition formerly was stored. It is a large hole in the ground, and there is no way out except the one small entrance. Two or three of your men could guard that."

"Certainly," the bandit agreed.

"And then, Señor Garabito, I would give them water and food and let them rest."

"You are growing kind to the aristocrats."



"Señor Garabito is not a fool," she said. "Certainly he must know that these prisoners are very tired now. And when a person gets so tired, that person does not care what happens. It is the same as a man walking in his sleep, señor. Feed them and give them water, let them rest in the cave for a time without being disturbed. And then, señor, they will furnish better entertainment. Just now they would furnish very poor amusement, indeed."

"Ha! The girl is right. You have brains, herder of turkeys! I hereby make you a colonel of my army! Go on—what next would you do with them?"

"I shall have to think of that, Señor Garabito."

"Do it!" he cried. "Think out some special way of tormenting these fine ladies and gentlemen and let me know."

"I think," she said, "that I would let my men rest until the middle of the afternoon at least, that they may appreciate the entertainment better. Let them rest—and drink!"

"The girl has more brains than any of us!" Ben Tarker declared.

"She has," Garabito agreed. "Tarker, have the prisoners put in the big cave, and assign four men to guard them. The guards must take no liquor, and they will be rewarded afterward. And then tell the men to feed and water their mounts, and after that they may rest along the creek and have all the liquor they want. We'll look to our prisoners again this evening. Feed and water the aristocrat curs, as the girl suggests; we want them

to be feeling fit for the entertainment. There is no fun in teasing a dog that lies down and whimpers."

Ben Tarker shouted his commands, and the column moved on toward the creek. Bianca kept out of sight behind her hut, pretending to be mending a break in her turkey corral. Now that she was alone she almost sobbed at the plight of her friends.

She waited until all had passed, until the men were down at the creek picketing their horses, and then she went into the hut and hurried to a window that faced the overhanging cliff. Up there at one of the slits, she supposed, Don Felipe was watching.

From a peg in the wall she took a towel, and waved it back and forth across the window. Then she bent forward and watched. From one of the slits far up on the face of the cliff emerged a green bough. For a moment it remained outside, and then was slowly withdrawn. That meant that Don Felipe had seen the towel and was ready to receive a message.

Bianca waved the towel peculiarly before the window, pausing now and then. Up in the cave, Don Felipe Mendoza, his face glued to the slit in the rock, watched and spelled out words to himself, while Standon wondered what it was all about. Presently the don turned from the aperture in the wall and gave an exclamation of joy.

"She has done it, señor!" he told Standon, slapping him on the back. "She has made José Garabito listen to her again. They are going to put the prisoners in one of the caves, give them food and

water, and let them rest until late this afternoon. Meanwhile, Garabito's men will be drinking. It is his intention to torment the prisoners later, of course."

"That must be prevented!" Standon said. He had watched the prisoners being herded across the clearing; old men, young boys, beautiful and refined women.

"Señor Standon," Don Felipe said, "it is not known to these bandits, but the back wall of that cave can be reached through a passage, and that back wall is no more than a few inches in thickness. It will be an easy matter to make a hole."

"Then we can rescue them."

"At least, we can try," Don Felipe said. "We can get them out of the cave and into the passage, and along the passage and into another, but we'll have to hide them somewhere. The bandits will discover the escape this evening, of course, even if we get the prisoners away without the guards knowing. I suppose it is necessary, señor. But it will have a bad effect in a way; it will show José Garabito that he has foes near at hand, and he does not think that. If only we can force him to believe that the men in the cup in the hills made the rescue, it will be well."

"Can we not send the prisoners to the cup in the hills?" Standon asked.

"Impossible! The cup in the hills can be reached only by a very narrow pass, and Garabito's men guard it always. Nobody can get in without the guards knowing. Bianca herds her turkeys in the

pass, but goes only so far. The turkeys wander up the pass, of course, but come back when she calls to them. We can send ammunition and messages, in a way that has not been revealed to you yet, but we cannot send human beings up there. We must try to hide them in some of the underground passages, arm the men so that they can fight, and get the women out on the other side of the hills. Garabito will have his men scattered throughout the country trying to get trace of them, of course."

"Suppose we start," Standon said.

Don Felipe led the way through the passages, and back to the rooms they used as a house. Both men looked to their automatics and made sure that they had quantities of ammunition, and Don Felipe got two picks and a shovel.

"This way, señor," he said. "I have an electric torch, and we need nothing more."

They hurried along one of the passages, entered another and began climbing. Don Felipe flashed the electric torch now and then to show Standon the way. At times the passage was so narrow that they had to crawl. At other times they passed through huge underground rooms.

Here the heat was terrific and the air not of the best. The dust rose in clouds, fine dust that got into the eyes and nostrils and made proper breathing difficult. On they went, rod after rod, twisting and turning with the natural tunnel, coming to where other passages branched off.

Finally Don Felipe flashed the torch and raised his hand for silence. They were in a passage about

ten feet wide and twelve high now, and though it was hot and the air was stagnant, yet there was room enough to make them comfortable.

They put their ears against the rock wall, and could hear voices as from a far distance.

"I examined this place once," Don Felipe said. "The bandits used to store ammunition in here, and it was in my mind to cut a hole through and destroy it some night. But before I could do it, they moved the ammunition to another cave. Here is the thin place, señor. We shall have to be very careful not to arouse the guards. Let me do the work until I have a small hole."

Don Felipe struck with the pick while Standon held the torch. He waited a time and struck again, making a little hole in the wall. His blows were spaced irregularly, in case the guards could hear. He was hoping that the prisoners were talking among themselves and that the sounds of the blows would pass unnoticed.

Bit by bit the rock wall was chipped away, and after a time the pick bit through, and fresh air rushed into the chamber. Don Felipe stopped and wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and then bent forward and looked through the tiny hole he had made.

The prisoners were about fifty in number and were scattered about the cave. Some of the women were praying, and some of the old men also. The younger men, for the greater part, sat on the ground or walked around, their faces expressionless; some were standing well forward toward the cave's mouth.

Near the hole were half a dozen men, and one of them Don Felipe knew well. He called, softly.

"Don Ramón! Don Ramón Hernandez!"

There was instant silence in that part of the cave, and the man he had called looked around startled.

"This is a friend! Back to the wall!" Don Felipe said.

Don Ramón Hernandez did as he had been ordered, and finally he saw the little hole.

"This is Felipe Mendoza!"

"The saints be praised!"

"Silence; and listen! We are attempting to rescue you and the others. We have tools with which to dig through this thin wall of rock. Pass the word as quickly as you can, but be sure that everything looks natural to the guards. What of them?"

"There are four men watching the mouth of the cave," Don Ramón said. "They have a sort of barricade there; they do not come in, and they seem to think that we cannot get out."

"Have the most of your people keep to the front of the cave, and tell them to talk," Don Felipe instructed. "Make a noise, so the sounds of pick and shovel cannot be heard. Fix a line of men so we can be warned instantly and stop work if one of the guards starts to come into the cave."

Don Ramón Hernandez went back to the others, and Don Felipe and Standon watched while the word of impending rescue was being passed around. Even in the dim cave they could see the looks of joy in the faces of the prisoners; and they knew that the



men were warning all not to act as though there was hope.

The line was fixed so that a warning could be sent in whispers from the mouth of the cave to the rear, in case a guard started to enter; and then Don Felipe and Standon attacked the rock in earnest, stopping now and then to glance through the hole and be sure that everything was all right. A wrong move, they knew, would end in disaster.

In time, the hole was large enough to let any person pass through. Word came from the front that the four guards were sitting before the mouth of the cave playing cards. Don Felipe considered a moment, and then decided on his program.

"Standon," he said, "old Don Ramón Hernandez is a fighter. You and Don Ramón will comprise the rear guard. Here is my automatic and belt, which you are to give Don Ramón. He will come through first and stand with you. I'll start along the passage, and the others will come through as rapidly as possible and follow me. When all are through, you will follow with Don Ramón. There is but one thing to do, of course, if the flight is discovered, and you and Don Ramón will have to do it."

"I understand, Don Felipe."

Don Felipe called Don Ramón to the hole and explained, ordering that four or five young men remain near the mouth of the cave until the last, arguing in loud tones, cursing the bandits, indulging in such talk as they might, to lead the guards, did they come to the mouth of the cave, to think that all was well inside.

And then the rescue began. An old man came first to be with Don Felipe at the head of the column, then the women and girls were helped through, and then came the men. Don Felipe started through the passage, leading the line, and the others followed him silently.

When all were out, Standon and Don Ramón Hernandez started. They glanced back into the cave, and were glad to see that the guards had not entered. It was but a question of time, however, until one of them would glance inside and find the prisoners gone.

Standon and Don Ramón, their automatics held ready, started after the others.

"I am almost eager for the hounds to come after us, señor," Don Ramón said. "They got me while I was in bed, for I had not been feeling well for days. I saw my house looted and burned. I could endure that in a legitimate war, but these men are only murderers and thieves. They looted the houses of all political factions."

On they went through the hot, dusty underground passages, crawling when it was necessary, now and then stopping so that the women could rest. Finally Don Felipe came to where the passage forked, and there he guided the refugees into a large chamber that could be entered only through a narrow hole.

"Here is my plan for the present," he said, when all had arrived. "The prisoners will remain in this room, barricading the entrance. There are arms here, and plenty of ammunition. It is one of our store-rooms. The opening above gives fresh air, and the

bandits cannot smoke you out. They will follow the tracks this far, and then they will besiege you. Señor Standon and I will get food and water to you by another way. Garabito's thugs will think they have you cornered, for there are passages of which he does not know.

"Señor Standon and I will go down the other passage, blocking its narrow entrance with those stones. The bandits will not follow there if they meet with resistance here. Three men can fire through your barricade and hold off Garabito's entire force. If he attempts the use of high explosives, retreat through the passage at your back. Garabito does not know of that."

The barricade was erected swiftly, and the men got the arms and ammunition from the hiding place in one corner of the room and prepared for defense. Then Standon and Don Felipe stopped up the little mouth of the other passage, and hurried on toward the place where they could look down upon the bandit's camp.

The men were down by the creek, drinking liquor, carousing, singing their ribald songs, howling at one another. Garabito and Ben Tarker were in front of the former's hut in conference with a couple of other men. The loot had been taken from the horses and piled at one side of the clearing.

"The escape will be discovered before long," Don Felipe said, "and then there will be a proper row. One thing is certain: if Garabito's men follow the tracks along the passages, many of them never will get to the outside air again!"

## CHAPTER X

### WILD PROPHECIES

CARLOS, the hunchback, dashed into the clearing on his wild mule, shrieked at the beast, and stopped within a short distance of José Garabito's hut, there to sit his mount and look over the scene of celebration.

The intoxicated brigands greeted him with a chorus of cheers and jests, and then turned to their drinking again.

"Another mascot," Garabito said.

"Last night I met him far up the highway," Ben Tarker said, "and asked him what he was doing there. He told me he had gone out there to talk with the stars."

"Ho, Carlos!" Garabito called. "Come here!"

Carlos kicked the flanks of the mule and dashed forward in a cloud of dust. Just when it seemed as though he was going to ride down the chief bandit, the mule stopped, and a shower of pebbles deluged Garabito and his lieutenant.

"Wild cavalry!" Garabito said, laughing. "That was a gallant charge, Carlos. We'll have to take you along when we make our next campaign. Perhaps, before long, there will be a chance for you to ride your wild mule through the oil fields at Tampico."

"Why not make him an officer?" said Ben Tarker.

"I'll do it!" Garabito shrieked. "Carlos, dismount and come here!"

The hunchback obeyed, a vacant expression in his face. Carlos could look very much the imbecile at times. Half-witted he was, save in some things. He seemed to be sensible enough when dealing with Garabito and the bandits.

He stood before the door of the hut, his lower jaw sagging, his eyes bulging, and his hands dropped at his sides.

"I shall make you a captain, Carlos," Garabito said. "True, I have no command to give you just now, but you shall be a captain for all that. Hereafter, all my men shall call you captain, and salute when you pass."

"Thanks, señor," Carlos said.

"You'll be on my personal staff, of course. I'll want to consult with you before making an important move, and perhaps have you consult with the stars. Have those same stars told you anything recently?"

"Many things, señor."

"About me and my fortunes?"

"Si, señor!"

"Let me hear them. I am a brave man. Tell me what the stars say, Carlos."

The hunchback scratched his head as though trying to remember. In reality he was trying to remember—what he had been told to say in just such an emergency. He was afraid that the Señorita Bianca would scold if he forgot.

Then his face cleared, and he gave a peculiar smile as he glanced at Garabito again.

"The stars said that there is going to be a big fight," he said.

"What else?" demanded the bandit chieftain.

"All your men will be in it, señor, and there will be a long ride, too."

"Ha! The Tampico expedition, and Monterey, probably. There will be good loot there!"

"The stars say, señor, that there will be fortunes and misfortunes also."

"A soldier expects both, hunchback. We cannot have good fortune all the time. If somebody wins, somebody else must lose. What else have the stars been talking about?"

"The señor will have a disappointment, but I do not know what. And he has a certain enemy."

"I have scores of them," Garabito declared. "They do not cause me to lose sleep."

"This enemy will come upon the señor unexpectedly, and they will clash."

"I'll make a wager as to that."

Carlos was working well now. Thoughts were crowding to his brain. Fiction was forming even as he spoke.

"You will get the better of this enemy for a time," he said.

"Only for a time?"

"And, in the end, señor, this enemy will be the death of you."

"What is this?" Garabito shrieked. "You are saying that I am going to die? Soon?"

"The stars do not tell me how soon, señor. But there will be a big fight, and a long ride, and your enemy will slay you."

"A curse on you, hunchback, for a bearer of bad tidings!" José Garabito cried. "If I did not fear you, I'd have you whipped from the camp. Consult the stars again to-night, and learn more for me."

"I'll do that, señor."

"And see that they give good talk. A big fight and a long ride, eh? That is natural, of course. Very well, Carlos, you are a captain. But you'll have to bring me a better prophecy before I give you promotion."

"A captain has a sword," Carlos observed.

"Want a badge of rank, eh? Wait a moment!"

Garabito ran to the huge pile of loot and began pawing through it. He had seen a sword there a short time before. Finally he found it and bore it back to Carlos in triumph. The weapon was of the finest Toledo steel, a relic of the days when gentlemen wore such at their sides continually. But José Garabito did not see the fineness of the blade. He knew little of swords. He made a bow, and presented it to the hunchback.

"Buckle it on!" he commanded. "You are a captain in truth now. And do not forget to ask questions of the stars to-night. Find me the name of this enemy who is to be the death of me, and ascertain when my death is to occur. I crave exact information."

"I shall try, señor," Carlos said.

"You may retire, captain," Garabito replied, with



irony. "Take the remainder of the day off, but be sure to be present for the celebration. There will be more presents for you when the loot is distributed."

"Si, señor!"

He made Garabito a bow, saluted Ben Tarker gravely, and hurried back to his mule. His face was still expressionless, but his mind was busy. So these men thought he was a fool, did they? And yet they were superstitious, too, thought he talked with the stars and could read the future, and so were a little afraid of him.

He sprang to the mule's back and started back across the clearing, the sword hanging bravely at his side. He saw Bianca standing in the door of her hut, and smiled and waved at her. Though he did not know it, Carlos the hunchback understood love better than José Garabito or any of his motley crew.

In front of the hut, Carlos sprang to the ground and hurried up to the señorita.

"Garabito has made me a captain and has given me this fine sword," he said.

"I saw you speaking with him and Ben Tarker, Carlos. And what did you say?" she asked.

"I threw fear into his heart, señorita, though he tried his best to act as though he did not believe my words. I told him that there would be a big fight and a long ride, and that he had an enemy who would kill him in the end. I am quite sure that it frightened him, señorita. And Ben Tarker believed the tale, too."

"What made you think up that story of an enemy, Carlos? That was a good touch."

"I do not know, señorita. Something just made me say it. Perhaps I really and truly can look into the future at times, and say what is to come. I—I have the feeling now."

"And what do you see?"

"I seem to see José Garabito dead, señorita, and this Señor Standon standing beside him breathing heavily."

"Señor Standon?"

"Sí, señorita! The man who came with you from Chihuahua. Señor Standon is to slay this José Garabito before it all ends. And that is as it should be, señorita. Señor Standon is a good man."

"I feel sure of that."

"And he loves the señorita."

"Carlos! How dare you say such a thing. You do not know what you are talking about!"

"I have seen the way the Señor Standon looks at you, señorita. He loves you dearly already, though he does not yet know it himself. There can be no question of it."

"Nonsense!" she cried, blushing furiously. "You never must mention such a thing again, Carlos, either to me or to anybody else. I have your promise?"

"You have my promise, señorita."

"Then come inside, Carlos. I have some food for you."

Carlos, as a rule, ate whenever he could and whatever he could find. On such days as he happened to be at the señorita's hut when there was food

prepared, he feasted. Yet it was not a feast to Bianca, who was used to excellent fare, and who dared not use fancy supplies here, lest Garabito wonder how she obtained them. A poor peon girl turkey herder did not indulge in delicacies such as salads, rich puddings, and fruits out of season.

Sitting at the little table in one corner of the hut, Carlos wolfed the food she gave him and drank huge gulps of cold water. Bianca stood near the window for the greater part of the time, looking at the face of the cliff, and wondering whether Don Felipe and Standon had succeeded in getting the prisoners out of the cave.

Out in the clearing, the men were still drinking and shouting. Garabito went into his hut to attend to some business matters, and Ben Tarker walked away from it, as though without any particular destination, appearing to be thinking deeply on some subject.

But he drifted toward the turkey herder's hut, for he had watched Carlos go into it, and guessed that he was eating. Ben Tarker wanted to speak to Carlos.

Mixed blood flowed through Ben Tarker's veins, and the strain of superstition in it was strong. He was almost afraid of Carlos, and he believed that the half-wit held some peculiar power. He had paid strict attention while Carlos was looking into the future for José Garabito, and some things that Carlos had said had caused Ben Tarker to do a great deal of thinking.

As is usual in such organizations, the lieutenant

coveted the boots of the superior. Ben Tarker was firm in the unspoken opinion that he was a better leader of men than José Garabito, that it was his schemes that resulted in the most victory and the greatest profit; and he had the idea that Garabito knew it and was trying to keep him in the background.

Ben Tarker thought, also, that the men—most of them—would follow him as willingly as they would follow Garabito. He had pleased the small detachment left behind by leading them against the men in the cup in the hills, had given them the idea that he was a dashing leader who wanted to fight instead of moping in a camp and waiting for some good opportunity to turn up. And the men who had fought with him, he knew, were telling their fellows what a good general he was, and how fearless.

So now Ben Tarker went toward the turkey herder's hut, stopped for a moment to pat Carlos' mule on the head and pull its long ears, and then stepped to the open door.

"Ha, señorita!" he exclaimed. "Ho, Carlos! Eating her out of house and home, are you?"

"He does much work for me, Señor Tarker," Bianca said. "He cuts wood and carries water, and sometimes helps me with the turkeys. Carlos is a good boy."

"He is an excellent boy," Ben Tarker replied. "Carlos, when you have finished, I want to talk to you. Remember, you are a captain now, and we must hold a council of war now and then."

"Si, señor."

"I'll be waiting behind the hut in the shade."

Ben Tarker disappeared from the doorway, and they could hear him going around the hut. Bianca glided quickly to Carlos' side and spoke to him in whispers.

"Attention, Carlos!" she said. "Stand just at the side of the window when you talk, so that I may overhear. I have an idea, Carlos, and perhaps I have guessed correctly about something. If Señor Ben Tarker asks you what the stars have said concerning him, tell him to wait—that you'll let him know in half an hour or so—and then come to me for instructions."

"I understand, señorita."

"Go then, and stand as near the window as possible, but do not let him suspect."

Carlos sprang up from the table and hurried through the door. The señorita began singing a love song, to induce Ben Tarker to think that she was going about her business of housekeeping and was not concerned in his affairs.

Carlos stepped around the end of the hut and found Ben Tarker waiting for him there. The hunchback dropped to the ground in the shade, within a few feet of the window, as he did often when he wanted to rest; and Ben Tarker, glancing around to make sure that none of the men were strolling in that direction, finally sat down beside him.

"Carlos, are you my friend?" he asked.

"Of course, señor!"

"And I have always been your friend, have I

not? I never have teased you much, as some of the men have?"

"Not much, señor."

"I asked José Garabito to make you an officer, did I not? And so now you wear an excellent sword and the men will have to salute you."

"You have been very good, señor."

"What I am going to say to you now, you must never repeat. I am your superior officer, and I command it."

"Very well, Señor Tarker."

Ben Tarker glanced around cautiously again to make sure that nobody was near, and then he bent closer to Carlos and spoke in a low tone, yet Señorita Bianca could hear what he said as she stood just inside the window.

"I want you to look into the future for me, Carlos. Tell me whether I am to be a greater general. Understand? There are many who think that José Garabito is growing weak, and that I soon shall take his place. Tell me, Carlos, what the stars say about it; and never mention this to anybody."

"I understand, señor," Carlos said.

"If it is destiny that I should step into Garabito's shoes, I'll reward you, Carlos. I'll make you rich, and give you promotion; I'll consider that you and the little turkey herder are my mascots, and make fine folks out of you."

"Señor Tarker," Carlos said, scratching at his ear and looking a bit puzzled, "something has been buzzing in my poor head about this very business.

If I—if I can get away alone for half an hour or so, and think, and try to remember——”

“Meet me in half an hour, hunchback.”

“That will be best, señor. I have not finished my meal, you see. And I think I can remember within that time.”

“In half an hour, Carlos, meet me over at the foot of the cliff, beside the creek.”

“Very well, señor.”

Ben Tarker got up immediately and wandered around the hut and back into the clearing as though he had been looking over the camp as becomes a good lieutenant, and Carlos hurried back into the hut and was confronted by Bianca.

“I was able to hear everything, Carlos,” she said. “And I am sure that this is our great opportunity. Can you understand what it all means?”

“Si, señorita! This Ben Tarker wants to lead the bandits in the place of José Garabito.”

“Exactly, Carlos. Now we must be very careful what we say and do. If we can get José Garabito and Ben Tarker fighting against each other, it will be fine for our people. An army split into factions is a poor army, Carlos.”

“I understand, señorita. And just what am I to tell this Ben Tarker out by the cliff?”

“Listen closely, Carlos, while I whisper.”

Carlos did, and then he sat down and ate some more, and at the end of the half hour he left the hut again and went through the brush to the base of the cliff, where he sat in the shade for a few minutes until Ben Tarker came to him.



Carlos remained for a time looking straight ahead of him at the rock wall. Once he brushed his hand over his eyes; and presently he looked up at Ben Tarker as though he had just realized that Tarker was there with him.

"Have you been thinking about what I told you, hunchback?" Ben Tarker asked.

"Something seems to come to me, señor," Carlos said, in a peculiar voice.

"Can you look into the future for me? You did for José Garabito. You promised him a big fight and a long ride, and that an enemy should kill him."

"The señor might not like what I see—what I tell him," Carlos said.

"Tell the truth, hunchback. I am man enough to endure it, no matter if it is a promise of bad fortune. The man who knows his future is well armed. What do you see for me?"

"I see two strong men," Carlos said, lifting his head and raising his eyes to the sky. "One is in a position over the other. That is just as it happened, señor, and not because this man is superior in any way. In reality, the subordinate is the superior, señor."

"Ah!" Ben Tarker gasped.

"It is in the future that this subordinate could do great things, but he may not because he remains a subordinate. Something seems to tell me that this subordinate will not take the reins of power into his own hand; and if he hesitates for any great length of time, it will be too late forever."

"Suppose he asserts himself, hunchback?"

Carlos hesitated a moment, bent his head and closed his eyes, and held his hand at his forehead for a moment. Presently he spoke again, looking up at Ben Tarker.

"If the subordinate asserts himself without waiting too long, señor, he will have great power, and men will flock to his banner."

"Those are good words, Carlos!"

"If he asserts himself, he can command what he desires, without limit. He has not gone farther along the road to success because he has been afraid."

"Afraid, hunchback!" Ben Tarker exclaimed angrily.

"Afraid to take matters into his own hands," Carlos continued. "He has held back, whereas he should be bold to strike all obstacles from his path. I—I can tell you nothing more, Señor Tarker!"

Ben Tarker paced back and forth for a time, thinking deeply. And then he whirled toward Carlos.

"Your man shall be bold henceforth, hunchback!" he said. "And in the day of his success he will not forget what you told him. I'll make you rich, Carlos; make a gentleman out of you!"

"Thanks, señor!"

"Garabito made you a captain, did he? I'll make you a colonel, Carlos! Consider yourself one from now on. But I am your leader, not José Garabito. Been afraid to assert myself, have I? I can make up for that soon enough!"

Tarker's superstition was white-hot now. Had a man of reputed learning told him such things, he

might not have believed, but because they came from a half-wit he thought they were true. Tarker belonged to the class of people who believe idiots and the insane the recipients of special favors from supernatural influences.

He threw back his head and laughed long and loud, and then he started through the brush, with Carlos hurrying along at his heels. Ben Tarker did not seem himself. He seemed to be in rare good humor, and already his eyes were flashing like those of a leader of men.

They approached the hut, and Anita came from it and stood before the door, watching them.

"Ho, herder of turkeys!" Ben Tarker cried at her. "Why are you not wearing your diamond necklace? Be my good mascot, turkey girl, and I'll bring you more diamonds than you can wear!"

"Thank you, señor!" Bianca said.

"Anita, the herder of fat turkeys!" he said, stopping before her. "Young woman, you are far prettier than any of the aristocratic females we found in the town of Chihuahua. I was not there, you know. Garabito picked them out, and I think he must have let the best ones get away from him. There should have been more loot, too."

"There seems to be a lot, señor."

"A pretty mascot!" he cried. "I shall give you the honor of kissing me."

"Señor!"

"You would not refuse to kiss your general?" Ben Tarker said.

He laughed and lurched toward her, meaning no

insult, merely believing her to be a peon girl who would be a bit shy, yet willing to be kissed by such a prominent man.

But Carlos knew, of course, and understood that Bianca could not have endured that this man as much as touch her hand. She recoiled, and Ben Tarker pressed forward to grasp her, still laughing loudly.

But Carlos was between them like a whirlwind, and the sword José Garabito had given him was out of its scabbard and held ready for use. Low growls came from the hunchback and he hurled Ben Tarker backward.

"How dare you do that, you misshapen cur?" Tarker shrieked. "Are you entirely out of your senses now? One side, hunchback!"

"Señor, if you touch the señorita, I shall run you through!" Carlos cried.

"By the saints! Is it such an awful thing to kiss a wench? By the soul of me, hunchback, I believe that you are jealous! And what do I care if you are? I'll have my kiss!"

As he spoke, he lurched forward again, angry now and determined. And once more he found the hunchback before him, the naked blade in his hand.

"No nearer, señor!" Carlos cried in a voice that trembled. "Not a step!"

"Do you want me to shoot you down?" Ben Tarker screeched at him. He drew his revolver from its holster, and Bianca, who had been standing

against the wall of the hut, her face white, suddenly screamed.

But Ben Tarker did not fire. It came upon him that Carlos had a wonderful power, that he had shown the way to glory and profit, and that Señor Ben Tarker might have need of him again soon.

"It—it was but a jest," Tarker said. "It is easy to see, hunchback, that nobody can steal this girl from you while you are around. An officer you are, and jealous! Put up your blade, hunchback, and laugh at the affair. As for you, señorita, you have missed a kiss."

The brush parted, and José Garabito, who had been walking near and had heard her scream, stood before them. His eyes took in the scene rapidly. He saw Bianca against the wall of the hut, fear in her eyes for Carlos, her cheeks flushed now instead of white as she contemplated the affront Ben Tarker had offered her. He saw Carlos, his eyes blazing and the sword in his hand, standing in a menacing attitude, and he noted the expression of guilt in Ben Tarker's face.

"What is this?" José Garabito demanded sternly.

"Nothing!" Tarker growled.

"It appears to be something."

"I was but fooling with the girl—offering to kiss her—and this hunchback got jealous and would have run me through with the toy sword you gave him."

"That sword is no toy, as you probably would have discovered had Carlos seen fit really to use it on you. And you have no business bothering this girl. I have issued orders that she is to be pro-

tected always, and her turkeys also. Fool! We want the common people to be friendly to us, not against us! There are plenty of aristocrats. Do not let me find you annoying the girl again. Now assure her that you meant no harm."

"I dislike being talked to like a dog, or a boy," Ben Tarker said.

"Then do not act like a boy—or a dog."

Ben Tarker whirled to face him, his countenance flushed. "I do not like the manner of your speech!" he cried.

"I command here!" José Garabito said quietly. "I expect obedience from all under my banner. That means officers as well as men, officers especially. If you care to remain an officer of mine——"

"And if I do not?" Tarker interrupted angrily.

For an instant their eyes blazed into each other. José Garabito's hand dropped toward his holster.

"I have shot down men for such a show of treason!" he said.

"Who are you to speak of treason to me?"

"Señor!" Garabito said sternly. "You are speaking to your general. You seem to be out of your right mind. Even drunkenness is not an excuse for such language and conduct."

"I am not drunk! And you need not tell me that I am."

Now José Garabito took a step forward, and once more their eyes clashed.

"So!" he said. "I have been watching you recently, Ben Tarker. I thought you had reached the stage most lieutenants reach: where they think they

should command. Is that what you think? You would displace me, would you? Say the word, Tarker, say the word!"

It was the crucial moment, a moment fraught with many possibilities, the instant for Ben Tarker to declare himself openly and fight José Garabito for what he desired, or to admit defeat and thereafter remain in a subordinate position.

Bianca had her arm around Carlos, and they were standing near the doorway. And now she drew him backward and into the hut, for the next instant, she thought, these two men would be shooting, and either José Garabito would remove an enemy, or else Garabito would die and the irregular army have a new commander in chief.

José Garabito's hand was resting lightly on the butt of his heavy revolver, which still swung in its holster at his hip; he was waiting calmly for Ben Tarker to start to raise the weapon that he was holding at his side.

A tense moment, and the crisis passed. For a shout came from the edge of the clearing:

"Ho, general! The prisoners are gone! General, the prisoners have escaped!"



## CHAPTER XI

### UNDERGROUND BATTLE

**I**N the hidden passage in the mountain of rock, Don Felipe Mendoza and John Standon had been peering through the slits in the wall and watching the camp of the bandits below them.

The men were drinking, those who already were not sleeping off the effects of heavy liquor. The horses and mules were wandering around eating the tough grass. But José Garabito's picked guards maintained order and behaved themselves. The bandit chief was very particular about his guards; he had been known to shoot down one who did not attend strictly to business, and he always rewarded the men who came off duty by relieving them of all work and commands for some time, and allowing them to take their recreation as they pleased.

Don Felipe and Standon had seen Ben Tarker around the hut, had witnessed his conversation with Carlos down near the creek, and had watched the scene before the hut afterward, during which Don Felipe made little gurgles of rage down in his throat and Standon felt his anger rising. Then they had seen Garabito and Ben Tarker facing each other, and had expected to see Garabito shoot down his chief lieutenant.

"I do not pretend to understand it, señor," Don Felipe told Standon, "but I take it that the señorita will signal us later, if there is any news. It appears to me that Garabito and Ben Tarker are on the verge of a quarrel, which would be an excellent thing if it came to pass."

"I do not like the señorita to be subjected to danger," Standon observed.

"No more do we—who have known her all her life," Don Felipe said, and Standon was not sure whether he meant the remark as a sort of rebuke for the interest he had shown in Bianca. "But Garabito will protect her, I feel sure. He believes that Bianca and Carlos are his mascots."

And then came the alarm.

Garabito and Ben Tarker forgot their quarrel instantly in the face of this emergency. The announcement that the prisoners had escaped was so astounding that they were shocked for a moment. Garabito turned his back on his new foe and ran through the brush to the clearing, and Ben Tarker followed at his heels.

The camp was a scene of excitement now, and the men were crowding around the mouth of the cave, shrieking to know what had happened. They parted and let their officers through, and Garabito and Tarker came face to face with the four men who had been on guard there.

"It is not our fault, general!" one of the guards cried, in evident fear of Garabito. "We knew nothing of it until just now. We sat before the entrance

playing cards. Suddenly it seemed quiet inside, and we went to investigate. They are gone, general, all gone!"

"But how?" Garabito began.

"They did not get out this way, general. They did not come through the entrance and pass us. They made a hole in the back——"

"Torches!" Garabito shouted. "And some of you who are sober come with me."

Ben Tarker, forgetting his quarrel with Garabito for the time being and remembering that he was the second in command, began picking out the sober ones and thrusting them forward to where Garabito stood. That the prisoners could escape—all of them—from a cave to which there was but the one entrance was something that could not be believed easily.

They rushed inside with Garabito leading them, weapons held ready, half expecting a trick of some sort. The light from the torches showed them nothing but an empty cavern, and the little hole at the back through which all the prisoners had gone.

José Garabito held up a hand to command silence, and when he had obtained it he stepped to the hole, put his head through it, listened, and held the torch close to the floor so that he could see.

"Here is a peculiar thing," he announced. "It took picks and shovels to make this hole. We searched the prisoners well, and they did not have tools, nor were there any in the cave. And that hole was started *on the other side!*"

"Impossible!" Tarker cried.

"Is it?" José Garabito said with a sneer. "Look! Beyond is a passage, of which we did not know. It is a question where you'll find the other end of it. Somebody came through that passage, did this work at the wall, and let the prisoners out. They have gone through the tunnel, for there are their tracks in the dust. Tarker!"

"General?"

"Have some of the men scatter along the base of the hills and try to find the outlet. Order them to shoot down any of the prisoners they see. Into that tunnel, the rest of you sober ones who are armed! Get what electric flash lights we have, and use them well. Follow the prisoners and drive them out at the other end, wherever it is. We'll make their liberty a short one. You need not hesitate, and do not waste much time taking precautions. The prisoners were not armed, you know."

Here was action of a peculiar sort, but the men welcomed it. They crawled through the hole and filed into the rock passage, flashing their lamps, holding their weapons ready, fighting against the clouds of dust and the stifling heat, half afraid, half superstitious, wishing it was at an end, but never thinking of refusing to carry out the order.

Garabito sat down inside the cave with some of his officers near him, and tried to think it out.

"They had help," he said, after a time, "and it came from the outside. I did not know of that passage behind the cave, and I am sure that none of the men did. Can it be possible that those aristocratic

devils up in the cup in the hills have found an underground passage that leads down to our camp? And, if somebody on the outside helped them, where is he hiding, who is he, and why have we not seen him?"

He got up and stood with his fists against his hips, looking at them, and they did not like his scrutiny. It was as though José Garabito was thinking that there was a traitor in the camp.

"Some peculiar things happen in this locality," he observed, presently. "One of the most peculiar is how those men in the cup in the hills get their ammunition. We know that they receive cartridges in some manner; they have shot away many times the supply they had when they first retreated there. It is about time that we had an explanation."

None of them seemed to have any answer for him. Garabito paced back and forth across the cave before them for a time, his anger growing steadily, while his officers began to grow afraid. Garabito in anger was a terrible thing.

The bandit chief had the feeling that he had reached a crisis in his affairs. He had thought that good fortune was with him because the loot of Chihuahua had been so easy. But now Ben Tarker was turning against him, it seemed, and the prisoners had escaped, and there were many other things that he could not explain to himself. José Garabito was the sort of man who, when there are things that cannot be understood, feels a superstitious fear.

A sudden sound of gunfire came down the passage and rolled into the cave, and Garabito and the others

turned and hurried to the hole that had been cut in the rock.

"Quick work!" Garabito said. "Rounded them up in the passage, I suppose."

The firing continued, and cries of pain floated down to those in the cave. Garabito grinned as he whirled to face the others.

"They did not get far," he said. "And now they're being shot down like rats in a trap. A lot of good it did them to try to get away. I hope the men spare a few, so we may have some fun afterward."

Now the firing was redoubled, and pungent smoke drifted into the cave from the tunnel. There were more cries, screams of terror and of agony, and the sound of rushing feet. Through the hole sprawled some of the bandits, gasping for breath, almost strangled with the smoke and the dust.

"They are fighting, general," one of them gasped. "They have a barricade in the tunnel, and are firing from behind it. They have rifles."

"Rifles? How can they have rifles?" Garabito cried. "Have you fools been shooting at one another?"

"They are barricaded, general." The man gasped for breath, and Garabito turned to another, who was trying to get the smoke out of his smarting eyes.

"They fired at us without warning, señor," the man said. "They have rifles; there can be no doubt of it. We were choked in that narrow passage and the smoke and dust and heat——"

"What has happened?" Garabito shrieked.

"We have some dead men in there, and wounded."



"Do you mean that you five men are all that are left of the thirty I sent into the tunnel?"

"Si, señor!"

"Here is something that needs an explanation!" cried Garabito.

He was like a man suddenly gone mad. He rushed from the cave and looked at the men gathered there, and over the camp. Ben Tarker had sent his detachment along the base of the hill, following the creek, as Garabito had instructed. Even now he was in the distance, ordering more men up the side of the hill for a short distance, shouting to them to be alert, and to look carefully for an entrance to a cave. Ben Tarker was going as he had been commanded, Garabito thought.

He glanced at the men near him, and beckoned a few noncommissioned officers he could trust.

"A squad each!" he commanded. "The prisoners are in a natural passage behind the cave, and are showing fight. I suppose they have been given a few popguns by somebody. Get them out! Dead or alive, but get them out! Understand? Get out our wounded, also. Be lively about it!"

Garabito's men were used to fighting in dark places, yet had it been possible they would have refused to do as they had been ordered. To go into that dark, narrow tunnel was a terrifying thing, to stumble over the dead and dying, breathe the hot air, inhale the dust and powder smoke, perhaps be shot down and die in such a hole!

If they used torches, they but made good targets of themselves; and if they did not use the torches,



they could not see what they were doing. But there could be no hesitation when José Garabito commanded, especially since he stood there with his blazing eyes upon them.

The noncommissioned officers gathered their squads, looked to their weapons, entered the cave and hurried across it to the hole in the rear. They crawled through and disappeared.

Garabito was like a maniac. He issued orders as fast as he could speak, calling upon his men to get busy at a hundred tasks that were not at all necessary, asserting his authority because he was leader enough to know that this was a time when authority was needed to keep men from wavering. He roused the drunken ones, ordered horses picketed properly, commanded that the camp be policed instantly. Officers and men flew to do his bidding. José Garabito was on a rampage; at such times he might do anything, even draw his revolver and shoot down the man nearest him.

Sounds of firing rolled from the tunnel again, and a cloud of pungent smoke drifted into the cave. Once more came the shrieks of pain and the groans of agony. A sergeant staggered through the hole, blood streaming from a wound in his shoulder.

"It is a slaughter, sir," he reported. "We have to approach them through a narrow passage, and they pick us off. They have heavy rifles without a doubt, sir, and an abundance of ammunition."

"What are my men doing in there?" Garabito asked him.

"There are only a few left, sir, and they are shoot-

ing at the barricade out of the dark. And every time a gun flashes a bullet comes in answer, sir. And the smoke——”

“Are a few cursed aristocrats to hold up my entire force?” Garabito shrieked. “Get them out! Get as many as possible out alive, and I’ll show them how to shoot down my men. More men, here! Fifty of you!”

“The tunnel is almost choked with bodies, sir,” the sergeant said.

“Clear them out. In with you, men! Get the bodies out, attend to the wounded, and then go after those aristocratic devils. And remember to get as many as possible alive!”

The men were hanging back. Garabito took his revolver from its holster and with it motioned them into the cave and toward the hole in the wall. They went immediately. In the tunnel they might have some small chance; they would have none at all if they rebelled.

Garabito followed them inside and remained near the hole, some of the officers with him. They began carrying out the dead and wounded and taking them from the cave. The men outside began growling among themselves. They did not fancy an underground battle. What chance had a soldier there? Why not blow up the tunnel and let the hated aristocrats be buried alive?

More dead and wounded were carried out, and then sounds of firing came from the tunnel again. The men outside scattered, trying to get a short distance away from the mouth of the cave, eager to miss

nothing in the way of news, yet wanting to be out of sight if Garabito came forth again for more men to go into the tunnel.

They growled more, showed their dissatisfaction. These superstitious peons had no love for fighting in the dark, when the other man was not in the light and a good target. The mere thought of being wounded or slain underground terrified them.

Ben Tarker came back from the creek to find this state of affairs, and he immediately turned it to his own account. He knew men to whom it was safe to talk, and he talked to them in whispers, and they in turn talked to other men.

They and their comrades would not have to go into that tunnel to almost certain death if Ben Tarker commanded them. José Garabito was careless of his men; he was not the commander he once had been. If Ben Tarker, now was their general——

They forgot in their present terror that Garabito had led them successfully in the looting of Chihuahua, and that they had come away with valuable swag and prisoners without losing many men. Bandits of that sort have no country or flag to hold them together, only admiration for a leader. It is easy to lose admiration and change from one leader to another.

Out from the tunnel came a stream of wounded men, and others carrying dead bodies, not yet stiff, that had been choking the narrow passage. Every wounded or dead man aided Ben Tarker, in a way. The men growled more than before, and many began looking toward him as though expecting him to save them. But Tarker pretended to be busy ordering the

camp put to rights, as though no battle was going on a short distance away beneath the ground.

José Garabito suddenly appeared in the mouth of the cave.

"More men!" he cried. "Men who are not afraid, and who can shoot. Double portions of loot to the men who bring out a prisoner either dead or alive!"

They did not surge forward. Every man who heard appeared to be very busy at something. Garabito took half a dozen steps and stood with fists against hips, his eyes flaming.

"Into the cave!" he shouted. "I command it!"

A chorus answered him:

"No! No!"

He whipped out his revolver.

"I command it!" he shrieked. "Are you a pack of cowards? Are these the men who follow Garabito? Are you old women? Has your blood turned to water?"

"It is sure death!" cried somebody in the crowd.

Garabito sneered. "Afraid, are you?" he shouted.

"The general does not go in!"

Garabito could not tell whence came that shout, or there would have been instant murder done. He sensed, too, that this was the crisis of his leadership. If he gave an inch now, it would all be over.

"Afraid, scum?" he cried. "I'll go first! Understand me? I ask you to follow. Are you cowards now?"

This was the old Garabito. A feeble cheer started and grew in volume. A couple of men pushed for-

ward. More joined them. A stream of men hurried toward the entrance to the cave.

"We follow you!" they cried. "We can win if you lead us, general!"

Ben Tarker, who had been standing behind a clump of brush, watching, curled his lips. He had lost, he knew, for the time being. Garabito had saved his leadership for the moment.

But perhaps Garabito would not come from the tunnel alive, and if he did, there would be other chances. For the words of Carlos were burning in Ben Tarker's brain. He would assert himself!

## CHAPTER XII

### DYNAMITE

**S**TANDON and Don Felipe Mendoza, when the underground battle began, armed themselves and went through the long passages, after telling Doña Inez what was happening and asking her to keep her own cave room.

They came to their own small barricade and peered through. Far down the tunnel they could see the lights of the bandits' torches as they approached.

Garabito's men were following the tracks of the bottom of the tunnel, and so kept from becoming lost in the maze of passages formed by nature in the hill. Nearer they came, moving slowly, always on the alert. And then a voice called to them from behind the big barricade, a voice that held a note of command in it.

"Stop! Another step and we fire!"

The voice rang through the passage, and Garabito's men saw that the tunnel ahead of them had been choked with rock. They saw, also, glistening in the light from the torches, barrels of guns protruding through and menacing them.

They scattered to either side and opened fire. A volley answered them; and whereas their bullets splattered harmlessly against the barricade, those of the prisoners struck home. It was then that the first cries of agony came.

Down the tunnel they fled, and back they came again, to receive another volley.

"The curs are getting it!" Don Felipe said, calmly, as though he had not been watching men die. "They have it coming to them, señor. I do not wish to seem unduly bloodthirsty to you, Señor Standon, but when I think of the evil things José Garabito and his men have done, I can feel no mercy."

"I know, Don Felipe," Standon replied.

Repeatedly the assaults were hurled back. Garabito's men never got within fifty feet of the baracade, save to lie there motionless, and none inside had been touched. Then came the first retreat, and a new force to meet disaster.

Then there was a wait, while the smoke gradually cleared from the tunnel, and the prisoners continued watching carefully, wondering whether the bandits had had enough of it. Don Felipe and Standon continued watching from the other narrow passage.

"Garabito never can get to them," Don Felipe said.

"But this cannot last forever."

"There is a way out for my friends," Don Felipe replied. "But they can be moved only at night, and we must be sure what is being done outside. Carlos will get to us after nightfall, no doubt, and let us know. As soon as possible, we can get to them by a way I know, and take a few of them to the open air. Only a few at a time, señor, for we'll have to get them under cover in some manner. It will be a difficult job."

"And how are we going to do it?" Standon asked.

"Each night we can get out a few, make up a



small party, and get them far enough away so that they can ride for the border and the States. That will be the only safe thing just now, since Garabito has looted Chihuahua and may take a notion to return there. We can give them food, of course, since we have plenty, and we can furnish each night's party with a few firearms and some ammunition. Horses will be the greatest difficulty."

"True, they must have mounts," Standon said.

"And that is what is bothering me," Don Felipe admitted.

"It would be justice to send them to freedom on the horses of the bandits," Standon answered.

"If it were possible, señor."

"And why is it not possible?" Standon wanted to know. "It seems to me that, for a fighting Texan, I am having little to do in this affair. Why not let me get the horses, at least."

"But how, señor?"

"Merely show me how to get out of these confounded caves," Standon replied. "And show me where you want the horses delivered. We have a late moon these nights. I have been watching Garabito's camp. He is not watching his horses carefully. He thinks that he is in friendly country. If a federal force was approaching, he would know it and be cautious. But he is not expecting one man to steal horses and mules from him."

"It would be dangerous," Don Felipe said.

"Señor!"

"I beg your pardon! But you must not forget

what happened between you and José Garabito. If he gets his hands on you——”

“As to that, he probably would execute any man he found stealing his horses,” Standon said. “But I do not intend to let him catch me at it, not wishing to stand before a firing squad.”

“Garabito reserves the firing squad for men he wishes to honor,” said Don Felipe, chuckling a bit. “That is the least of the horrors he has at his command. However, señor, we’ll take up this subject later. First, we must see the outcome of this peculiar fight in the bowels of the earth.”

They could not communicate with the prisoners in the other tunnel behind the barricade and ascertain how they were getting along, and Don Felipe did not care to call out. It was dark in the tunnel now, and he feared that some of Garabito’s men might be trying to spy without using torches, that they might hear his voice and locate the second barricade. And Don Felipe did not want that. If Garabito ever suspected another tunnel and managed to get into it, he would be led to the hidden rooms, and the work of Don Felipe and Doña Inez would be at an end.

Now sound told them that men were coming through the passage again. It was Garabito leading his new force, but they did not suspect the presence of the bandit chief. They came without torches, Garabito having one of the men who had been in before to guide him. Fifty feet from the barricade, they stopped.

There were whispered instructions, a short silence, and then came a ringing word of command. In-

stantly electric torches flashed and were directed toward the barricade, and the men who did not hold the torches began pouring a murderous fire against the rock. The torches went out, and Garabito and his men dropped to the floor to let the return volley go over their heads. Here and there a man was struck by a bullet that ricocheted, but the casualties were slight.

But those behind the barricade did not cease firing and give the bandits a chance to creep nearer. They maintained the fire, sending billows of pungent smoke toward the enemy, the flashes of their weapons revealing the crouching or prone men.

Now there began to be casualties in earnest, and the shrieks and cries began again. Garabito's voice rang through the passage, ordering his men to charge past him and get at the barricade, to tear it away, to get inside and finish the aristocrats.

But his men were sagging back, ready to turn and run through the tunnel toward safety. Garabito shrieked and swore, and emptied his own revolver after those who ran. Then he turned and followed them.

He had seen it for himself. He knew that the prisoners could keep off his men as long as they had ammunition, and he guessed that, in some peculiar manner, they had been furnished with an abundance of cartridges. He knew his men had not lied; the prisoners had rifles, and powerful ones.

Back through the passage and into the cave they struggled, and Garabito was the last through. Inside the cave, he stormed at them, called them cowards,

ordered his officers to one side for a conference. Ben Tarker had a suggestion to offer.

"We are losing valuable men and gaining nothing, general," he said, boldly. "Since these fancy prisoners of ours so love to be under the ground, let us keep them there. Barricaded at the end of a passage, are they? A few sticks of dynamite will keep them there forever, and it can be set off without great loss."

It was a suggestion that met with ready approval from most of the others. Garabito hated to lose the chance of making his victims pay for what they had done. He would have loved to have tortured them in front of his force; but he realized that he would not keep the regard of his men if he sacrificed some of them needlessly.

"Let it be dynamite!" he cried. "Bury them alive! Call a squad that can handle the stuff properly, and put in a charge that will blow up the rock and block the tunnel forever." He raised his voice, so that his words were carried to the crowds of men nearest him. "And we'll get more aristocrats with whom to play," he added. "I'll lead another expedition, get more loot and prisoners. Tarker, see to the thing! Use plenty of explosive; be sure that you bury them well!"

The squad was selected, and with a veteran of the underground war to guide them, they entered the passage and made their way cautiously, silently and without lights toward the barricade. The sergeant in charge suggested in whispers that they get out the dead and wounded men first, and this they did, save

a few close to the barricade who had been dead since the first assault.

They did not have to approach too close to the barricade. An explosion to break in the walls and choke the tunnel would be just as effective a hundred feet away. So they planted their explosive, and strung their electric wires. José Garabito's engineering force, which was small, had excellent equipment nevertheless; they had looted mining properties to get it.

A slight noise caused those behind the barricade to fire half a dozen shots; the flashes of their rifles showed the bandits at their work. Don Felipe Mendoza and Standon realized what was being done, and instantly they left their barricade and hurried back through the tunnel. The shots alarmed the bandits. A single bullet was enough to touch off that explosive and bury them alive as well as those behind the barricade. At last their work was done. They retreated rapidly, stringing the wire. There was a short silence—and then a tremendous crash seemed to shake the hill.

Through the clouds of dust and smoke, the engineering squad stumbled back into the cave, gasping and coughing, their work done. The sergeant in charge saluted José Garabito.

"As you ordered, general," he said. "We cannot go in and see the effect, of course, until this cursed smoke and dust has cleared away. But I assure you, general, that the tunnel is wrecked. Your prisoners will never escape."

Garabito thanked them and waved them away.

Then he passed through the crowd of men before the cave's mouth—some of whom looked upon him in admiration and some of whom turned aside to hide their scowls—and went to his hut. Señor José Garabito had several things that he wanted to think out. He knew that the crisis had not passed.

Don Felipe and Standon had reached the rooms, and explained to Doña Inez what had happened.

"None of our friends is injured," Don Felipe declared. "They set the charge a hundred feet away from the barricade. I had anticipated it, and told them what to do. Now, Señor Standon, we'll travel underground for quite a distance and find our friends again; and as we go, we'll consider that little plan of yours regarding the horses."

He said no more before Doña Inez, but when they were in a new network of passages, flashing their torches, where even Don Felipe had to be careful to avoid becoming lost, the don spoke of the matter again.

"As I said, it is dangerous," he declared. "But it seems to be the only way. We cannot keep these people underground forever and feed and water them. We must get them away, a few each night until they all are gone. It all depends upon how many horses you can steal, señor. And they will be strange horses. Can you handle them?"

"I am a Texan," Standon laughing a bit. "I can talk horse language, almost."

"And you want to do it?"

"It is the only thing to do."

"Then I'll show you how to get out of this con-

founded rabbit run in a place where all the world will not see you. We'll wait for night and Carlos, of course. He can tell us whether Garabito has men scattered around the side of the hill."

"I anticipate no trouble, señor," Standon said. "Garabito, I believe, is firm in the opinion that he has buried his prisoners alive. I think I can get some horses away easily, if you will show me where you want them placed. It will not be difficult this first night. But when Garabito, night after night, misses horses, he may make it more difficult for me."

"It is a terrible business," Don Felipe said, sighing. "And the men in the cup in the hills——"

"What of them?" Standon asked, as Don Felipe hesitated.

"They have asked for ammunition, but that will be attended to in the usual manner. They are growing tired of being cooped up like so many fowls. They want to come out and fight. If we could all combine and strike one great blow at Garabito!"

"Perhaps it can be done," Standon said. "At least, we can do several things to annoy him. I dislike the idea, Don Felipe, of Señorita Bianca being subjected to such danger. If Garabito ever suspected——"

"He must never suspect!" Don Felipe said, in a terrible voice. "One thing you must remember, Señor Standon: No matter what happens, you are not to endanger her. Should you meet, you will not recognize her; she will be to you as any poor girl you might see for the first time."



"You need have no anxiety on that account, señor," Standon told him.

"You seem greatly interested in the señorita."

"I have wandered around the world for some years, Don Felipe, and I have seen many women. Señorita Flores is the first that has caused me to—well, I cannot explain it."

"You have just explained it," said Don Felipe, with some sarcasm. "Um! Here is something for which I did not bargain. However, nothing more need be said of it at present."

"I did not say, Don Felipe, that I ever intended saying anything of it."

"Of course you didn't. But a man falling in love is a peculiar thing. I have been falling in love with Doña Inez for some twenty years, ever since she was a girl of seventeen—and no good has it done me. I saw her married to another, saw her widowed, waited the proper interval and pressed my suit. Señor Standon, as one man to another, that delicious lady toys with me."

Standon laughed.

"Oh, you can laugh!" Don Felipe said. "Wait until Bianca toys with you. I know the blood that is in her veins. Did she love you to distraction, señor, yet she would not surrender until she had tormented the life half out of you. It is an ordeal, señor, but would you have it any other way? Eh? Sweet torment, by the saints! And what asses we are—speaking of love here in the bowels of the earth within striking distance of brutes of bandits, when

we should be saving these brave friends of mine. It shows what love does to a man!"

Don Felipe flashed his torch again and led the way forward, jerking his hat down over his eyes as though trying to hide a blush. Standon grinned and followed at the don's heels. But he was asking himself whether it could be true that he really was falling in love.

Now they came to a passage so narrow that they were forced to crawl through the dust. The air was bad, and they scarcely could breathe. But they emerged into a large room where there was a crack in the roof that allowed some air and light to enter, and there they rested for a time.

On they went, following another tunnel that gradually sloped upward, and then they heard voices in the distance, and Don Felipe called out, not wishing to be taken for a bandit and shot.

A moment later, they were in the midst of the rescued prisoners. There had been no casualty, but some of the women were hysterical because of the firing and the dark. Don Felipe's arrival did much to soothe them.

He explained quickly what was to be done, and suggested that they decide among themselves which ones were to leave the first night. If Standon could get the horses, it would not be so difficult, Don Felipe explained. He would guide the party around the base of the hill himself, or have Carlos do it, and through a narrow pass that would take them within striking distance of a highway that ran toward the border. Then they had but to ride. The bandits

confined their roaming to the other side of the range of hills.

Don Felipe promised ample food within a short time. He refused to show them the way out now, fearing some of them might attempt an escape and be caught. He went with Standon back through the passages, but not all the way they had come. Don Felipe led through a branch tunnel, and came to another room where food had been stored. He and Standon carried back a supply of hard biscuits, tinned meats, and several canteens filled with cold water.

It suddenly struck Standon that Don Felipe must be very well acquainted with the locality indeed to know it so well. It appeared that the don had discovered all sorts of rooms and passages, and had cached food and weapons and ammunition in several places. He spoke to Don Felipe about it.

"It is simple," Don Felipe replied. "All this belonged to my family when I was a boy. We owned the place south, too, where the hidden cañon is. Evil days came upon us, and this place was sold, a matter of ten thousand acres. My family dwindled. Then the place to the south was sold. Finally, there remained to me only a house in Chihuahua, and some jewels and money. I am comfortable, señor, as far as money goes. I have funds in an El Paso bank, too. But the great magnificence of my family is gone. There are men who say that those great estates caused all the present trouble, that they kept the common people from getting land. That is foolishness, señor. Give those people land, and they will get nothing from it. When there were great estates,

every peon had a proper living and could rear a family if he so desired. If he did not better his condition, it was because he was too lazy to do so."

"That is the truth!" Standon said.

"Any time a man who has health and an ordinary amount of intelligence does not better his condition, it is because he is lazy," Don Felipe declared. "Some men would rather wail about their ill fortune and blame it on others than work to better it. What asses we are! We'll be talking politics next. Now come with me, señor, and I'll show you how you are to get out to-night, and where you are to fetch the horses."

Don Felipe showed the way. And then they went back to Doña Inez to get coffee and hot food, and to wait for night and the coming of Carlos.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE HORSE THIEVES

NIGHT came swiftly, a black night without moon or stars because of low-hanging clouds that rolled over the hills like a shroud. But Don Felipe, observing the weather indications and speaking out of the fullness of his experience, informed Standon and Doña Inez that the clouds would lift before midnight, and that the moon would be bright toward morning.

They ate a meal that Doña Inez prepared, and then they went to the slits in the rock and looked down upon José Garabito's camp. The fires were burning brightly along the creek, and the men were drinking and carousing again. Yet some few remained sober to act as guards, and these seemed to act as a sort of military police also.

There was a fire before Garabito's hut, and some of the officers were apportioning the loot. Garabito and Ben Tarker sat on stumps beside the fire directing the operation. The turkey herder's hut was in darkness.

Standon noticed that the horses were picketed for the greater part, and that saddles and bridles were piled on the ground near the picket lines, some of the heaps covered with tarpaulins and some with no protection whatever.

"An elegant army!" Standon sneered.

"You must remember," Don Felipe chuckled, "that this army is responsible to no government. Neither does it have to buy supplies. When a general steals his equipment, he does not take much care of it. If a few saddles are ruined, he merely takes a small force to some ranch and gets a new supply. His service of supply merely consists of a band of experienced thieves. It is an economical way of conducting a campaign."

After a time, they went back to the room where Doña Inez was waiting. Before long Carlos arrived to tell the news of the day.

"Señores, Garabito and his men think that the prisoners are buried alive in the mountains," he reported. "There were men scouting around the base of the hill, but they have been recalled to camp. The guards are as usual to-night. They are going to distribute the loot, which will command their attention. A great many are drinking because of the fighting inside the cave."

"What else?" Don Felipe commanded.

"The señorita and I are playing a trick," Carlos reported. "We have made Ben Tarker believe that the stars have been talking about him. I have told him, señores, that if he asserts himself he can take the place of José Garabito, and already he is at work with some of the men."

"Ha!" Don Felipe exclaimed. "Get them to fighting among themselves, that is the idea! And how about our friends up in the hills?"

"Some ammunition will go to them in the morn-

ing, Don Felipe. It is all arranged. Then we will get a message, if there is any to come."

"Very good, Carlos. You are sure that you understand what Señor Standon is to do?"

"Quite sure, Don Felipe. I shall be glad to help him. I know where all the guards are placed."

"And do you think that it can be done?"

"Undoubtedly, Don Felipe, if care is used."

"Then you will get your wild mule, Carlos, and after Señor Standon gets a few horses you are to guide the party of our friends through the pass and to the highway that runs to the border."

"I understand, Don Felipe."

"What was that row I noticed before Bianca's hut?"

"Ben Tarker wished to kiss the señorita, and I was there to prevent it."

"Watch over her closely, Carlos. Where did you get the sword?"

"José Garabito made me a captain in jest, and gave it to me, Don Felipe. And this Ben Tarker, after I had given him a prophecy, promoted me to be a colonel, I think it was. I have only half my wits, Don Felipe, but it seems to me that Garabito and Ben Tarker have less than that."

Standon and Don Felipe laughed long and boisterously at that, and even Doña Inez joined in, her musical laughter filling the cavern. Carlos ate some food—he always was ready to eat—and then announced that he was prepared to guide Standon around the base of the hill and to the camp of the bandits.



Standon made sure that his automatic was in working order and that he had a sufficient supply of ammunition. Then he shook hands with Don Felipe Mendoza, bowed to Doña Inez, and followed Carlos through one of the passages and to an opening in the side of the hill, far up the side and hidden by a clump of brush. The opening was very small, so that they were obliged to stretch themselves out and crawl through it. Seen from the outside, it resembled nothing so much as the den of some small wild animal.

The night was black, and Carlos led the way to the creek, which was no more than a foot deep here, and they walked along in the stream so no tracks would be left. The rushing of the water over the rocks covered the slight noise they made.

It was a slow journey, for now and then they stopped to listen and make sure that none of Garabito's men had strayed into that locality. Discovery, John Standon knew, would wreck all their plans even though he made his escape.

Finally they rounded the base of the hill and could see the gleaming camp fires in the distance, could hear the loud jest and raucous laughter of Garabito's men. The victims of the day's underground battle had been buried, but they were not mourned save here and there where some man had lost a particular friend of years' standing.

For a time, they remained hidden in the brush, watching and listening, and then Carlos whispered to Standon to wait, and disappeared in the darkness, making no more noise than a shadow as he went through the brush.

It was some time before he returned, and Standon had about decided that Carlos would be unable to return, and that he should go forward alone, when the hunchback suddenly appeared at his side.

"There was one guard in the way, señor," Carlos said. "But I have attended to him."

"You didn't use your sword?" Standon asked. He had no love for the bandits, but he shuddered to think of a cold-blooded murder.

"Not so, señor," Carlos said. "I struck him from behind, so that he knew nothing. And then I fastened his wrists and ankles with vines and stuffed dry moss into his mouth."

"That's a unique way of binding and gagging a man," Standon observed.

They went on along the creek, and presently left it when they came to a place where Garabito's men had walked and where they could follow without the risk of leaving footprints that could be traced.

Now they crept through the brush and came to the end of one of the picket lines. Here was where the real danger began, Standon knew. The horse guards might be sober and making their rounds like good soldiers. A straggler might happen in the vicinity. A commotion among the horses might bring half a dozen men down upon them eager to discover the cause of the racket.

Standon whispered for Carlos to remain quiet, and then he crawled forward and came to the first horse, whispering to him, approaching him slowly, so that the animal did not even snort his fear to find a man coming upon him out of the darkness.

The next instant, Standon was patting the horse on the neck and speaking again in a whisper. He had told the truth when he had said to Don Felipe that he could almost talk horse language. He quieted the animal, had it nuzzling him, and then reached down gently and cut the rope that held it to the picket line. He led the mount away slowly, reached Carlos, and whispered instructions.

While Standon went back for the second horse, Carlos put saddle and bridle on the first. It was a slow business, and a dangerous one, but good fortune was with them. Soon they had six horses, with bridles and saddles on, and each led three as they went back through the brush and to the creek.

Standon felt safer when they reached the stream and could walk along in it, safer with every rod he put between them and the camp of the bandits. They circled the base of the hill without disaster, and came to the rendezvous that Don Felipe Mendoza had appointed. Mendoza was waiting with some of the refugees.

"Six!" he whispered. "Very good, señor. I think that will be enough for to-night. We dare not risk too much, you understand. I'll pick out three men and three women. Carlos, you have your mule?"

"He is not far away, Don Felipe!"

"Get him at once, and be prepared to start."

Fifteen minutes later, six of the prisoners rode up the side of the hill to reach the narrow pass by a short cut that Carlos knew. The others remained underground, each hoping that it would be his turn the following night.

Carlos was back before dawn, and sleeping at the side of Bianca's turkey corral. He was awake when the theft of the horses was discovered, and watched and listened. It happened that Garabita could not account for six of his men that morning; nobody seemed to know whether they had been left dead inside the mountain, and the chieftain decided that they had stolen the six horses and deserted.

That simplified the matter for the time being, of course. But the bandit ordered a better and more careful horse guard for the next night, and Carlos, pretending to be stupid and not knowing what it was all about, stood near and heard the general's instructions.

That morning Bianca opened the gate of the corral and herded her turkeys along a path and into the brush, commanding them and guiding them with only her voice and her crooked stick. Standon and Don Felipe watched from the slit in the rock wall.

"A great girl!" Don Felipe declared. "What courage she has to play the part!"

"I suppose she has to herd them out in the brush now and then to keep up the character," Stanton said.

Don Felipe chuckled until the tears ran down his fat cheeks. "It is more than that, señor," he answered. "Some of these days you'll be told the entire truth, and then you'll laugh, too. The whole thing was Bianca's idea, and it works splendidly. What a girl!"

Standon remembered that he had promised to ask no questions. He felt like asking some now, but was afraid of the don's caustic tongue; and he liked the

mystery of it. He wondered how Bianca, herding her turkeys, could help the men in the cup in the hills, get information and ammunition to them, and obtain news.

Standon slept during the day, while there was nothing of moment in Garabito's camp except the division of the loot taken from Chihuahua. With night came Carlos again, to report on the day's events.

"There is to be a better horse guard to-night, señor," he said. "But I think we can outwit them; eh, señor?"

"We certainly can, Carlos," Standon replied.

"Ben Tarker has been sulking all day, and has scarcely spoken to Garabito. Tarker is working with some of the men, I think. There will be a clash soon."

"Let us hope so," Don Felipe replied.

It had been decided during the day that many of the refugees, the men, were to walk through the pass and reach the highway, and there make their way as well as possible toward the border. It was not to be hoped that Standon and Carlos could steal horses enough for all; but they were to try to get enough for the women and the feeble. Out on the highway, on the other side of the range of hills, those who were afoot would have many chances to get aid to reach the border.

At the proper time, Standon and Carlos crept from the cave again and went cautiously along the creek, as they had done the night before. Once more they hid in the brush, and this time, after a whispered con-

sultation with Standon, Carlos crept toward Bianca's hut.

He scratched on the door, and almost immediately Bianca opened it and stepped out.

"What is it, Carlos?" she whispered.

"You are to aid the Señor Standon and myself, señorita, if it pleases you to do so."

"Certainly it pleases me to do so," she said. "What is it that you wish me to do?"

Carlos told her, rapidly and in whispers, and then the two of them crept around the edge of the clearing and to the lower end of the picket lines. Standing back in the brush, they hurled stones at the horses and mules there. An instant commotion followed. The guards came running from every direction, leaving their posts, thinking that horse thieves were at work. While they were at the lower end of the picket lines, Standon worked quickly at the upper end, obtained four animals, and led them through the brush and to the creek, where he tethered them all.

Bianca and Carlos had not been able to remain in the vicinity long, for the guards were invading the brush to discover the reason for the commotion among the animals. Those who had been on duty at the other end of the lines went back to their posts, and Standon was unable to get more horses. The guards discovered the four to be missing, and an alarm sounded.

Carlos reached Standon again, and they crouched in the brush and watched. A squad investigated along the creek, but could do nothing in the darkness, and one went to report to Garabito, knowing well



that he would be punished for having fallen a victim to such an old subterfuge.

"We must get saddles and bridles," Standon said to Carlos. "But that will be easy after things quiet down a bit."

Half an hour they waited, and then they crept forward once more, going noiselessly through the brush. There was some wind now, and its wild rushing was valuable, since it covered the slight noise they made. They came to a pile of saddles, selected four, and struggled to get them back into the brush. Then Carlos waited while Standon went forward again to get the bridles.

Out of the dark there came a sudden hail:

"Who's there?"

It was Ben Tarker's voice; both Standon and Carlos knew that. He had been prowling around the edge of the clearing, and something had attracted his attention. Standon crouched in the brush and waited, his automatic held ready, knowing that he perhaps could fire and get away, but that plans for getting more horses would be ruined if he did. Garabito would guess that outsiders were at work, that the theft of the horses was not due to deserting soldiers of his command, as he had suspected at first.

"Who's there?" Ben Tarker shouted again, in a stern voice. "Answer or I'll fire!"

Standon could see Garabito's lieutenant now, silhouetted against the distant camp fires, not more than two dozen feet away from him. He made ready to fire instantly if Ben Tarker started to approach in his



direction, knowing that in such an emergency the first shot would be necessary.

But there proved to be no need of shooting down Ben Tarker from ambush. Señorita Bianca Flores suddenly laughed in a thicket at Standon's right, and her merry voice rang out.

"Did I frighten you, Señor Tarker? Is the big soldier afraid of a turkey herder in the dark? I was but searching for an old gobbler who has strayed from the corral. He is a tough old bird, but necessary to my flock for all that."

She sprang from the brush and confronted him for an instant, then laughed at him again and ran toward her hut. Ben Tarker growled a curse and walked back across the clearing in the direction of the encampment.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A CAPTURE

FOUR refugees rode northward toward the border that night on the horses that John Standon and Carlos had obtained, four women who could not be expected to endure the journey afoot. Several of the men walked beside them.

Standon knew that he faced a difficult task that third night, for the bandits were on their guard. José Garabito was convinced now that his own men had not been taking the horses, and he was commencing to wonder who were the thieves.

Garabito had severely punished the horse guards who had been on duty the night before, and for this night he had assigned to the task some of his most trusted and trustworthy men. Things had not been going to please Garabito. He was watching Ben Tarker closely, not wishing to start a quarrel with the man if it could be avoided, since Tarker was a good aid and had quite a following among the men, but ready to spring at Tarker instantly if he felt convinced that he was trying to usurp the leadership of the bandits.

The men were muttering, too, as though dissatisfied. Ordinarily, Garabito would have thought nothing of that, for it was like them to mutter after loot had been divided and they had been drinking and

gambling, especially those who had lost their share of loot at cards.

Garabito was contemplating a new campaign to keep his men occupied and arouse their enthusiasm again. He was waiting to hear from spies who were watching the federal troops supposed to be in pursuit of him, and who generally, queerly enough, rode in a direction opposite to that in which lay Garabito's camp.

He was keeping Tarker close to him this night, pretending to map out the contemplated campaign, acting under the knowledge that when Tarker was at his hut, Garabito knew what he was doing.

And so night fell, and Carlos once more went into the underground rooms and ate some of Doña Inez's cooking, and spoke of the events of the day.

"More ammunition was sent to our friends in the hills, señor," he said, "and there is still some to be sent. The bandits are nervous, too. They are fighting among themselves, Don Felipe, as they always do when they do not like the way things are going."

"What about the horse guards?" Don Felipe asked.

"Those who were on duty last night were punished by José Garabito, señor," Carlos said. "And to-night some trusted men are on guard. Garabito does not suspect who is running off his horses, and it is worrying him a great deal. I heard him talking to Ben Tarker about it."

"You'll have to be very careful to-night, Señor Standon," Don Felipe said. "Keep your eyes and ears open, Carlos."

"Si, señor!"

They crawled from the cavern as before, and Don Felipe started through the maze of passages to arrange for more of the refugees to start for the border. He did not doubt that Standon would get the horses in some queer manner.

Standon and Carlos were very alert as they made their way along. It was another dark night, with a mist shrouding the trees and rocks. Every few feet Standon stopped to listen, Carlos at his side. He feared that Garabito might have established a few outposts unknown to Carlos, and that they would run into one of them.

They reached the place where they left the rushing creek and struck through the brush. There they stopped to watch and listen for a time, and to formulate their plans. A whisper reached them.

"Señor Standon!"

Standon whipped out his automatic noiselessly and stood tense, but Carlos touched him on the arm.

"It is the señorita," Carlos said.

She crept to them through the brush, stood beside them in the darkness.

"It will be dangerous to-night," she whispered. "Garabito has many guards scattered around the camp."

"Señorita, you should not do this," Standon protested. "Suppose they were to find you talking to me. They would suspect you instantly—and I do not care to think what might happen then."

"May I not have a bit of adventure myself?" she asked. "Also, I have a plan. Carlos, creep through the brush and watch while I talk to Señor Standon."

Carlos crept away like a shadow. The girl stepped closer to Standon and continued speaking in whispers.

"Are there many yet to get away?"

"Only a few," Standon said. "Half a dozen more horses will do it. The most of the men are starting out afoot, but there are some of the women remaining."

"The men in the cup in the hills are eager to make an assault on the camp," she told him. "I know that much, but have not been informed yet as to the details, señor. You may tell Don Felipe that I'll signal him later."

"Very well, señorita," Standon said. He was surprised to find his heart hammering at his ribs, as though he had been a schoolboy taking a girl to a party for the first time. Standon had thought that he was beyond the influence of women, but the very presence of this girl near him, though it was so dark he sensed rather than saw her, was enough to influence him now.

"And Garabito and Ben Tarker are about to quarrel," she went on. "Tarker has been making particular friends of some of the under officers, and they are influencing the men. There will be trouble in the camp soon, señor."

"Let us hope so," Standon replied. "I'll be glad when it is over, señorita, for your sake."

"And why?" she asked. "What else is there left for me? It is true that my aunt and Don Felipe have some funds in El Paso, enough for us to exist upon. But that is all. Our beautiful home is gone,

our fortune, our friends scattered. It is a dismal prospect—my future—señor.”

“And do you never expect to have the future filled with love?” he asked.

“Señor!” she breathed.

He said nothing more. But he found her hand in the dark, and carried it to his lips, and he heard her little gasp as he kissed the palm of it. He would have said more, then, but there was a rush through the brush, and they heard Ben Tarker’s voice.

“Stand! Speak up quickly, or I fire!”

He was talking to the black night, they knew, yet it was a great risk. A chance bullet might find one of them, and it was possible that Ben Tarker had more men at his back. Bianca thrust Standon behind her, and spoke immediately.

“Is it you again, Señor Ben Tarker? Do you trail me around the camp each evening?”

“What are you doing there? Step toward me, señorita, instantly. And who is with you? To whom were you whispering?”

Her answer came quickly. “Is it surprising, señor, if I speak to Carlos. And now I am afraid that you have frightened him away.”

“Why talk to the hunchback out here by the creek?” Tarker demanded. “Have you not a hut at the edge of the clearing? It is peculiar that you prowl around the brush at night.”

“Perhaps José Garabito might not think so,” she said.

“And why did you whisper?” Tarker asked. “If you were about honest business, there would be no need of whispers.”

She had walked toward him, and now stood a few feet away while he flashed his electric torch in her face, and then at the brush around her. Standon had crawled to a small depression in the earth behind a clump of brush, and remained there breathless, automatic held ready. He did not want to fire if it could be avoided, for that would bring the men down upon him, and though he made his escape he would not be able to get any horses. He thought of the remaining refugees, and held his finger off the trigger.

"Perhaps," Bianca was saying, "Carlos and I heard a noise in the brush and thought that it was the horse thieves. In such case, we certainly would not shout, Señor Tarker. Has not José Garabito offered a reward for the capture of the thieves?"

"And are you out to earn it?" Tarker asked. "I do not like your actions, señorita. They are peculiar at times for a humble herder of turkeys."

"Yet what else am I?" she asked.

"I am wondering," Ben Tarker said. "There seems to be a spy in the camp, and it is no more than right that everybody be under suspicion."

"And do you suspect me? Of what, Señor Tarker?"

"How do men in the hills get their ammunition?"

"Do you think I carry it to them?" she asked, laughing merrily. "Do I ever go up the pass to the cup in the hills? You have been riding in the sun, Señor Ben Tarker, and the heat has touched your brain."

"Were you talking to Carlos?" he asked.

For answer, she raised her voice a bit. "Carlos,"



she called. "Come here, out of hiding. It is Señor Tarker, and nobody else."

There was a rustling in the brush, and Carlos stepped up to them. Tarker flashed the light at him, and extinguished it again.

"Hunchback, it would be better if you did not prowl through the brush with the señorita at night," Tarker said. "You may get a bullet through you when you least expect it."

"I'll be careful, Señor Tarker. But I am an officer now, and have a right to see that the guards are not asleep."

"Where is your fine sword?"

"I am keeping it in the señorita's hut," Carlos said.

"You two get back to the hut. Get away from this brush and the creek, at least. You may get tangled up with the horse thieves."

"Señor," Carlos said, "late last night, after the mist lifted, I talked with the stars."

"Wait!" Tarker commanded. "Señorita, go to your hut, I want to talk to Carlos alone about a certain matter."

"Very well, señor." She crashed through the brush, and Tarker went to the edge of the clearing to see that she did not loiter in the neighborhood. Then he turned to Carlos again.

"Now tell me what the stars said," he demanded. "And never speak of such things again in front of a third person. I understood this was to be a little secret between the two of us."

"So it is, señor," Carlos replied. "I talked to the stars, and they said that soon the time would

come for a certain man to assert himself or be a subordinate forever."

"Ha!" Ben Tarker grunted.

"They also said that somebody suspected, and was using a great amount of guile, señor."

"Indeed?"

"Are there really horse thieves, or are the horses being taken away for some certain purpose? The stars mentioned those things, señor. Who would be the horse thieves around here? Not your own men, as you know. And who else can be in the neighborhood? And where have the horses been taken. The stars hinted, señor, that it might prove more profitable to forget the thieves and watch José Garabito."

"Ha!" Tarker grunted again.

"And, at the first chance, it might be well to put matters to the test. The stars have whispered to me, Señor Tarker, that there are men tired of José Garabito's generalship, that they would welcome a change, but that perhaps they want to be sure the new leader is the proper sort of man. Are they to be blamed? How do they know that you are not afraid to stand up before Garabito? Did they see you take issue with him on some point?"

"Enough!" Ben Tarker growled. "Your stars talk to some purpose. Say nothing of this to anybody, Carlos, but keep your eyes and ears open. Watch and listen, Carlos, and presently you'll hear and see something."

"I'll do as you say, señor."

"Yet I do not understand why you and the

señorita were whispering out here in the brush. Are you carrying on a love affair?"

"The pretty señorita would not love a hunch-back," Carlos said, and Standon, who could overhear, noticed a quality in his voice that caused him much speculation. Carlos was of the type that would die for the object of his affection, that would be loyal forever though he knew it was hopeless.

"And where are you going now?" Ben Tarker demanded.

"To find my mule, señor, and late to-night to ride up along the highway and talk with the stars again. To-morrow, señor, I'll let you know what they say."

Ben Tarker grunted and entered the clearing, to walk straight across it in the direction of the headquarters hut. He slackened his pace as he approached it, and walked back and forth for a time, without noticing the salute of the man on guard. Finally he threw up his head as though he had reached a sudden decision, walked to the door of the hut, and entered.

José Garabito sat alone before a table upon which candles burned, looking at some reports. He looked up quickly as Ben Tarker entered, and frowned.

"Are you in such haste that you cannot have yourself announced?" he asked.

"Why bother the guard?" Tarker said. "I have something to communicate to you."

"What is it?"

"It is about that turkey-herding girl we call Anita."

"What about her?" Garabito asked, putting the papers aside.

"There is something peculiar about her," Ben Tarker said. "I doubt whether she is what she pretends. Nobody seems to know her except Carlos, the hunchback. She has a mythical aunt back in the hills, but nobody ever saw the aunt."

"It is not strange for her to live alone and herd her turkeys," Garabito said. "I have heard how her relatives come once a year and help her drive them to market. These hills, the brush, the little pass—there is good turkey food to be found here."

"Her manner is strange. She isn't like any country wench I ever saw before. To-night I heard somebody whispering out in the brush, and it was that girl and Carlos. Why were they whispering, and about what? It looks suspicious."

Garabito laughed. "Perhaps they are enjoying a love affair," he said. "Let them."

"She wouldn't be having a love affair with a hunchback. She is uncommonly pretty, and acts as though she knows it. At times, from her actions and speech, a man would take her to be a grand lady."

"Now and then one of the peon class has more brains and breeding than the general run," Garabito said. "Look at myself, for instance."

"Then you do not see fit to put a watch on her? She may be the unknown spy, for all we know."

"She is a turkey herder, nothing more," Garabito declared. "It seems to me, Señor Tarker, that you could find something more fitting to do than to

come in here and try to denounce a poor girl who resented the fact that you tried to kiss her."

"So you think that is the reason?" Tarker snarled.

"I do, señor! Again, I command you to let the poor people alone. They are our friends. We must stand with them, or we fail. They can do us a lot of good—or a lot of harm. If you wish to torment anybody, pick out some aristocrats, and torment them well."

"We had aristocrats, including women, but they were allowed to get away," Tarker said.

"You mean to insinuate that I did not take the proper precautions?" Garabito demanded angrily.

"You see fit to question my conduct?"

"The fact remains that the prisoners are gone and the men dissatisfied because of it," Tarker replied.

"I suppose you could have done better? It appears to me, Señor Tarker, that you act peculiarly and talk unusually for a loyal subordinate. Have you ambitions?"

That was the question direct, and Garabito stood up quickly as he snapped out the words. His hand had dropped to his side, so that he could draw a weapon instantly if there was need. It was the moment of crisis, and Ben Tarker realized it. But for the second time something interfered. The guard, excited, opened the door and stepped into the hut.

"General," he reported, "one of the outposts has captured a man trying to get at our horse lines. They have him here now!"

## CHAPTER XV

### A SCHEME THAT FAILED

JOHN STANDON remained hiding in the brush until Ben Tarker had gone more than halfway across the clearing; and then Carlos crept back toward him and whispered.

"He is gone, señor."

"Then let us get to work," Standon said. "We have been delayed more than enough already. Lead the way, Carlos."

They went forward through the brush as they had done on the other nights, except that they were more cautious and did not follow any of the paths. Now and then they stopped to listen, but heard nothing save the rustling of the breeze through the brush, the distant stamping of the horses, the far-away sounds of the camp.

They reached a place some fifty yards from the nearest picket line, and stopped there again.

"All right, Carlos," Standon said. "Keep it up, when you have started the row, for I may have hard work to-night to get away with any of the animals."

"Si, señor!" Carlos whispered. For a moment he gripped Standon's hand, and then was gone.

He was to create a disturbance as he had done the night before, in the hope of attracting the atten-

tion of the guards. But Standon guessed that the guards would not be taken in so easily to-night; they would watch the other end of the picket line. He intended to slip through the brush until he reached the middle of the line, and get his horses there. He could lead them a few feet away to the creek, and along that. He would have to return a second time to get saddles and bridles.

At the other end of the line, after a time, the horses began to snort and plunge, and Standon knew that Carlos was at his work. He began making his way through the brush toward the middle of the line, going cautiously and slowly, hoping that the guards would not think of watching there.

He came to the edge of the clearing, and saw that none of the fires threw a reflection where he intended to work. Out of the brush he slipped, and toward the nearest horse. He soothed the frightened animal, cut the rope close to the picket line, and led the horse back into the brush, tethering him there.

A moment he listened, and then went after his second horse. He did not intend to get more than three or four, for he knew he was running great risks, and three or four delivered safely was better than trying to get more and failing.

Suddenly half a dozen men launched themselves upon him out of the dark. Standon did not have time to get out his automatic, or to slip a knife from his belt. Yet he tried to throw them off and fight as well as he could, fight as only a desperate man can fight. He knew what was in store for



him if these men effected his capture and took him before José Garabito.

They shrieked and shouted, one of them issuing commands at the top of his voice, and others came running along the guard lines. Standon was fighting like a maniac, half expecting to feel the burning sting of a knife, but he did not. He knew then that there had been orders to take the horse thief alive.

Back and forth across the clearing they battled, but the combat was of short duration. Standon's automatic and knife were torn away, he was thrown to the ground, and three men held him there, exhausted, while another began binding his arms behind his back, then:

"Up, señor!" the one in command said.

Standon was glad to get to his feet. He was breathing with difficulty, and seemed to be dizzy. He wanted to regain his breath and strength, and make a dash for liberty if possible. Even with his arms bound, he might be able to get into the brush, lose them, and finally reach the creek and return to the cave.

But they guarded him carefully, undoubtedly thinking of the reward José Garabito would give them. They pulled him across the clearing and toward the headquarters hut, and sent in word. A moment later, Standon was taken into the hut.

Garabito had forgotten his quarrel with Ben Barker for the moment. He stood behind the table, his fists upon it, bending forward, waiting to catch a first glimpse of the prisoner. Standon was hatless,

and held his head erect. One look José Garabito took, and then a stream of oaths came from him.

"So!" he cried. "The big Americano who attacked me in the *posada* in Chihuahua, eh?"

"You mean the man you insulted, and who whipped you easily," Standon replied.

Garabito cursed at him and stepped around the end of the table. His voice shook with rage when he confronted Standon.

"A good capture!" he said. "So you have been stealing my horses, have you? I think, Señor Americano, that we'll have a little conversation. You evidently have information that I would like to possess."

"Possibly I have, but you are not going to get it," Standon said, looking him straight in the eyes.

"The act of stealing horses is enough to condemn you," Garabito said. "But we have another account to settle, señor, and you'll give me that information, too. There are ways to make you, señor. Possibly you have heard that I order a man before a firing squad when I feel like being merciful. Then, perhaps, you can imagine what I do to a man when I do not feel at all merciful."

"Loud talk!" sneered Standon. "Any drunken peon can say as much, I believe."

"You think you are bettering yourself by insulting me?"

"I think nothing about it," said Standon.

Garabito raged at him again, and then grew calm suddenly, and a crafty expression came into his face.

"Tarker," he said, "send word for half a dozen ,

of our high officers. Return yourself. We'll have a little talk with this big man from the States. There are several things I wish to know."

Ben Tarker hurried to the door and sent a man after the officers Garabito wished. The men who made the capture lashed Standon to a stool, and at a sign from their chief withdrew. Garabito walked back and forth and gloated.

"No man can affront José Garabito and succeed," he said, laughing a bit. "Sooner or later I pay all personal debts, señor. I am remembering how you struck me in Chihuahua."

"No doubt you do remember it, and your face is sore yet," Standon replied.

"You can guess what is in store for you, señor?"

"Loud talk!" Standon said. "Why not shoot me and have done with it—if you have courage enough? Isn't that a real gun at your hip?"

"Ha!" Garabito grunted. "You are eager to die, then? There may be some reason for that. But I'd rather have you talk before you die. You would anger me so that I would shoot you, eh? We may come to that later. But you are going to answer certain questions, señor. I shall extract the answers from you in a certain manner."

"The peon loves to use large words," said Standon.

"You call me peon?"

"With all respect due honest peons," Standon said. "You are beneath consideration, José Garabito—renegade, traitor, murderer and thief!"

"A traitor—when I fight for liberty?"

"For loot," Standon corrected. "You don't know

the meaning of the word liberty. You're a rotten general, Garabito, and a contemptible man."

"So? We shall see."

"A cadet officer in a boys' training school knows more of military affairs than you. When a man can take horses off your picket line several nights in succession——"

"But you finally were caught, señor," Garabito interrupted. "And now you are to pay."

"I always pay, which is more than you do," Standon answered. "But an end to this farce. If you are going to shoot me, do so and have done with it."

The officers Garabito had sent for arrived, Ben Tarker returning with them. Standon looked them over quickly. One he recognized as a man who had been in the *posada* in Chihuahua during the fight.

Garabito bade them be seated, and then he went to the table and sat down before it, and looked at his prisoner.

"There are several things I want to know," he said, "and you are going to tell me."

"You flatter yourself," said Standon.

"I'll keep you alive, perhaps, until you do tell me—and it will not be a life of ease. Don Felipe Mendoza, cursed aristocrat, fought with you in Chihuahua, which shows that you are allied with him and his kind. You escaped into the house of Doña Inez Flores, and in some peculiar manner you escaped from there. How did you do it?"

"Perhaps we made ourselves invisible and walked past you," Standon said.

"Tell such tales to the superstitious."

"I know of no man more superstitious than yourself," Standon told him.

"How do you happen to be in this locality? How did you get out of the city and get here? What is your object? If you stole the horses, where did you take them afterward? Where have you been hiding? How many other men who fight for the aristocrats are in the neighborhood? How do you get ammunition and information to the men in the cup in the hills?"

"Quite a lot of queries," Standon observed.

"You'll answer them all—and more. I have had enough of interference. I use my own methods to get the information I desire."

"Loud talk!" Standon said. "Bring on your torturers, Garabito, and see what good they can do. This scene grows monotonous. Can you do nothing but talk?"

"What do you know of the men in the cup in the hills?"

"I have heard that they cause you a lot of trouble."

"From whom?"

"Oh, I just heard!" Standon said.

Garabito got up and walked over to him, bent forward, slapped him across the face. Standon snarled in sudden rage.

"That is like you," he said. "You are a cowardly cur."

"Still hoping that you'll make me angry enough to shoot you down?" the bandit asked, laughing.

"Nothing as easy as that, señor. Since you do not care to answer my questions now, we'll let you reflect upon it for a time."

He turned to the others, searched their faces, and then motioned for the guard who stood at the door. "See that the stake is prepared," he ordered.

"Going to burn me at the stake, are you?" Standon asked.

"Not just yet, señor. We are merely going to tie you up, so that you will be very uncomfortable, and let you make up your mind whether you'll answer questions or not."

"I can tell you that now—there'll be no answers."

"We shall see, señor."

The guard came back into the hut with three others, and they conducted Standon out into the clearing. Now he saw a huge iron stake set in the ground, some chains around it. He had heard from Don Felipe how Garabito fastened victims to this stake and allowed them to remain there, their toes just touching the ground, their weight sagging against the chains, the hot sun beating down upon them mercilessly, without water or food. Half a day at the iron stake generally was enough for a man.

Standon said nothing as they conducted him to the stake. He knew that there would be no sense in attempting an escape at the present time. He would not be able to get more than a dozen feet before one of the guards shot him down.

At the stake, they stopped, and Garabito, Tarker and some of the other officers stood to one side

while some of the guards threw more fuel on a fire a few feet away and others prepared the chains.

The blaze leaped up, and Standon looked around him with interest. He was not far from the headquarters hut, almost in the middle of the clearing. Even if he was free, he would have a hundred yards or more to go before he could reach even the small protection of the brush.

They hurled him back against the stake and began binding him. But they did not use the chains. Garabito seemed to want to keep them for a last resort. They used heavy ropes one of the guards brought, binding him tightly from throat to ankles, so that he scarcely could move a muscle. His arms were lashed at his sides, his legs were tied close together their entire length. The ropes were wound around him like thread on a spool. Already gnats were stinging him, and he could do no more than bob his head or wrinkle his nose. He knew now the torture in store for him. They were building up the fire, too. Waves of heat rolled toward him, and the stake began to grow hot.

"A few hours of that, señor, and you perhaps will be ready to answer my questions," Garabito said. "If you do not, we shall use the chains—after they have been heated. And, in the end, there is always execution. But I think that a firing squad would be too merciful for a man who has struck José Garabito in the face."

"At least you were not tied in a chair when I struck you," Standon said, sneering.



"You'll sing a different air, my pretty señor, before noon to-morrow," Garabito cried.

Without another word, he turned and stalked back across the clearing toward the hut. The others walked away. Fifteen feet from the stake, one of the guards sat down on the ground, his rifle held in the crook of his arm. Standon did not doubt that he was a sharpshooter, and he almost laughed at the thought of one being there. It would take more than a professional handcuff king to get out of those ropes.

Ben Tarker walked away from the others, for he did not want to talk to Garabito again just now. He had decided that the time had come to strike, and he wanted to find some of his friends and make certain plans.

He reached the edge of the clearing and started walking along it toward a distant line of fires, as though examining the guards. The brush cracked beside him, and Carlos emerged.

"Señor Tarker!" he said.

"Well, hunchback?"

"It is something very important, Señor Tarker, if you can spare the time."

"What is it now?" Tarker demanded.

"Does the señor remember when I looked into the future for Señor Garabito?"

"Yes."

"I said a hard fight, a long ride, and in the end an enemy to kill him, did I not?"

"You did, hunchback."

"I saw that enemy plainly, Señor Tarker. I saw

him standing beside Garabito's lifeless body, a smile on his face."

"Well?"

"The man is in the camp, now."

"Am—am I the man?" Tarker gasped.

"No, señor. José Garabito will be moved from your path without your having to do it."

"Who is the man?" Tarker asked.

"He is the one they have at the stake, Señor Tarker."

"That man? You are sure?"

"I saw him in my vision, Señor Tarker, as plainly as I can see you now. More plainly, in fact. José Garabito believes that he is a thief of horses, does he not? It is in my mind, señor, that he is something more than that. Did not José Garabito have trouble with this man in Chihuahua?"

"I was not in Chihuahua, as you know, but some of the men told me the story. This big Americano entered a *posada* and when Garabito insulted him he beat Garabito in the presence of the others. Then, with the help of Don Felipe Mandoza, he escaped."

"And is it not possible, señor, that he came here and was loitering around the camp for the purpose of shooting down José Garabito when he got the chance? And it happened that a squad was watching for a horse thief and caught this man?"

"Um!" Tarker grunted. "There may be something in that, hunchback."

"Is my vision to come true, Señor Tarker? How can this man kill José Garabito if he is tied to the stake?" Carlos stepped closer and whispered.

"If he was free, he perhaps would kill Garabito. Then who'd be general?"

"There is no question of that."

"It would be wise, señor, so the stars are telling me, to see that José Garabito liberates this man."

"Garabito will do nothing of the kind," Tarker said.

"Then——" Carlos twisted his shoulders as if to say that it was all ended. "It seems to me that there ought to be some argument," he went on, presently. "There is no proof that this Americano came to steal horses, is there? He was only loitering around the camp. Perhaps he came to join the command. Cannot José Garabito be told that it is a bad thing to torture or kill an Americano? Those of the States might make trouble for him. He always has been careful not to touch Americanos, though he hates them."

"But there is a personal quarrel between Garabito and this man," Ben Tarker said.

"If Garabito could be taunted into fighting a duel with him, or something like that, it might serve. The stars have said that this man will kill Garabito, and take him out of your way, señor. But he cannot slay Garabito while he is tied to the iron stake."

"Enough!" Tarker said. "Go away, Carlos, and seek me later. I'll think about this."

Carlos slipped into the darkness, disappeared in the brush, and made his way quickly toward Bianca's hut. He already had informed her of Standon's capture, and had explained that he had been unable

to help him because he had been at the other end of the picket line at the time. She had told the hunchback to tell Ben Tarker that Standon was the man who was to slay Garabito.

Tarker walked around the edge of the clearing for a time, and met some of the other officers, with whom he held speech. He announced that the Garabito forces had had no trouble with the United States so far, and that it would be better to avoid it. If they committed no outrage against American citizens, he said, they might be recognized in time, and at least able to get arms and ammunition over the border. And were they to be denied all this because Garabito had a personal quarrel with this man?

He prevailed upon some of the officers, finally, to go with him to Garabito's hut and speak of the matter. Garabito received them with evident suspicion, and was coldly courteous, one of his worst moods.

"General," Tarker said, "some of us have been considering the case of this Americano."

"Well?" Garabito snapped.

"He is an Americano, that is the point. And we wish to do nothing that will get the United States down on us."

"Less than four hours ago I heard you cursing everything north of the border," Garabito said.

"It is not a question of hating the Americanos, general. It is a question of what is best to do."

"And what do you think is best to do, Señor Tarker?"

"If this man is tortured or killed, news of it is

sure to leak out. We do not know who came to this locality with him, or their reason for coming. And if the news is carried beyond the border, there may be a howl. If we affront no Americans, we may be recognized in time as a revolutionary party, may be able to get ammunition."

"You want me to let this man go free?" Garabito demanded.

"Perhaps it would be best, general. We have no evidence that he is the horse thief. He was only loitering around the camp. Perhaps he came to join us."

"Fool!" Garabito exclaimed. "This man and I had a fight in Chihuahua, and he escaped me through the aid of some cursed aristocrats. Is he an idiot that he would walk into my camp to join me, knowing that I hate all Americanos and him in particular?"

"Then, general, it seems that you imperil your cause and all of us through your personal animosity for this man. Why not fight him openly and fairly. Surely you are not afraid to do that?"

"A duel, eh, señor?" Garabito said, sneering. "You have hopes, have you, that I might be slain? And then Ben Tarker would command—is that it? A blind man could see through you and your schemes. Give me credit for having a certain amount of intelligence. I have this man, and I intend to extract certain information from him. Then I shall do with him as I please; and let the United States do as it pleases. This fellow is probably one of no importance in his own country. I am in my rights,

anyway; he has been consorting with my proper foes."

"I beg of you, general——" Tarker began.

"Say no more, Señor Tarker! I will deal with this prisoner as I see fit. And, Señor Tarker, a word of advice in your ear. As the hated Americans say, 'Watch your footprints!'"

Garabito sneered at him and turned to his reports again. But after Tarker and the others had left the hut, he got up and went to the door, and made sure that Standon was still lashed to the stake and that the sharpshooter, a man Garabito trusted, was sitting on the ground within a few feet of him.

## CHAPTER XVI

### ESCAPE AND SUSPICION

THE men had heard the news of the prisoner and had looked at him from afar, and then had lost interest. They would be informed, they knew, when there was anything to see, such as a delicate torture or a killing. It was José Garabito's usual plan to let a man stay at the stake several hours before going near him, and he did not care to have others approach.

So the sharpshooter was left alone sitting on the ground, yawning now and then, glancing toward the stake frequently, fully aware that he had a long, monotonous task before him.

He heard steps behind and whirled quickly to see who approached. It was the turkey herder, and the man knew her and often had spoken to her.

"Ho!" he exclaimed. "You who live your life with fowls, take a look at this queer bird."

"I heard about it, señor," she said. "A hated Americano, I understand, who has been aiding the aristocrats."

"Garabito had a row with him in Chihuahua, between you and me," said the guard. "And now Garabito will make him wish he hadn't been born."

"What is to be done with him?" Bianca asked.

"Again, señorita, just between the two of us,



I think that General Garabito is thinking up something this very minute. If you have any suggestions, carry them to him and be rewarded."

"Bah, Americano!" Bianca cried, showing disgust in her face. "If the fire were closer you'd feel more heat."

She started walking toward the stake. The guard sat up straighter and watched her.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"Is it against the rules to torment an Americano who helps the aristocrats?" she demanded.

"I guess you can do no harm," said the guard. "It is fitting that a woman taunt him."

"If I am to have any fun with him, I must do it to-night," she replied. "Garabito will have all the fun in the morning. How tightly you have bound him! He cannot move anything except his nose. Would it not be funny, señor, to see a gnat light on his nose and bite it?"

The guard laughed. "It would be a delicate torture," he asserted. "Have you a gnat with you?"

"I know something better than that, señor. Not far away is a nest of big black ants."

"*Dios!* You would make him shriek!"

"And why not?" she asked. "We can laugh while he shrieks, can we not? It is allowed?"

"That much will be allowed the turkey herder," the guard agreed. "Perhaps I can laugh so much that I can keep awake. I do not care to fall asleep on watch and have Garabito ordering me up before a firing squad."

Bianca threw back her head and laughed, hesitated

a moment, and then ran quickly past the guard and into the brush. It was some time before she reappeared, and she held both her hands doubled.

"You got them?" the guard asked.

"Si, señor; big, black ones, and they sting my hands even as I carry them. I could carry but a few, but I can make another trip, now that I have found the nest in the dark."

"Make him shriek, and make me laugh, or I shall regret that I gave you permission," the guard said.

"Oh, we shall have excitement enough!" she declared.

She began dancing toward Standon, who had been listening and watching and wondering what she intended. It was useless to hope that she could cut his bonds with the guard sitting a few feet away. Even though she handed him a knife, he could not use it. He did not see what subterfuge she could work. It would avail her nothing even if she drew a gun and made an effort to hold up the guard. Before she could unfasten the ropes, there would be an alarm.

She was singing now, a saucy little song that had to do with prisoners of war and of love, such a song as the men of the camp had sung often. She danced before him again, stopped in front of him and addressed him.

"Ho, Señor Americano! So they have you tied up like the pig that you are! I could put a knife between your ribs, señor, but that would end things too quickly, and José Garabito would be angry. So I have brought you some nice, big ants. They have

a peculiar sting, señor, and where they sting the flesh swells tightly. We shall see, señor, how much you can endure before you shriek. Tied tightly, aren't you? You can do no more than wriggle your nose! Ho, Americano!"

Now she danced all the way around the stake, advanced toward him, retreated, seemed to be trying to mock him. Suddenly she darted in and brushed against him, leered up into his face, put one hand to the back of the stake.

"So this is the fine Americano!" she said. "When the ants begin nibbling at your handsome face, we'll see how fine you are!"

Standon could tell that she was doing something with the ropes at the back, yet knew that she was not trying to cut them. Again she danced around the stake, and again she brushed against him and looked up into his face, and once more her hand—the other one this time—worked at the ropes at the back.

"Act!" she hissed under her breath, between gales of laughter. "Act—and try the ropes in fifteen minutes or so. Careful, señor!"

She darted forward suddenly and put her hand to his face. Standon, knowing that the guard could not see, kissed the hand, and in the reflection of the fire playing over her face he saw a wonderful look there for an instant.

Then she was dancing away from him again, laughing gleefully.

"Listen, Señor Americano!" she said. "Those ants have great teeth. Those ropes that are wrapped

around you and the stake from your throat to your ankles—they are small ropes and tough, but these ants could eat through them. Consider, then, what they will do to your face!"

She darted forward again, brushed her hand over his face once more as though putting more ants there, and whispered: "Use your nose, and guess! And don't forget to act!"

Back to the guard she darted, laughing still. The guard was laughing also to see the big Americano baited by the turkey girl. "More ants!" she cried, and ran into the brush again. And soon she was back, and this time she opened one of her hands and showed the ants to the guard. "Big fat ones," she said. "And hungry! How they sting my hands!"

She ran forward to the stake again, danced around it, pretended to be showing Standon the ants and then putting them on his face. But her hands went to the back again, and Standon knew that she had put the ants there.

And then, as she hurried back and sat down beside the guard, he used his nose as she had suggested, and guessed the riddle. It was molasses she had used—the rank, cheap molasses the peon buys as a luxury when he can. She had smeared the ropes with it at the back. And she had put on the molasses the big hungry ants, who could eat through a rope. They certainly would chew at a rope smeared with molasses, suck at it, tear it to shreds with the peculiar power of their jaws.

Standon remembered what else she had said, too, and began to act. He flattered himself that he did

it very well. He acted as though in torment yet trying not to show it, not overdoing it, not underdoing it. He was acting for his life, and blessing Señorita Bianca Flores for having a quick mind.

The señorita was laughing now, and the guard also.

"He will have a puffed face by morning," the guard said. "José Garabito will not be able to recognize him."

"How deliciously he throws his head about!" she said. "Were it not for the ropes, he would do some great squirming."

"He'll squirm before Garabito has finished with him," the guard declared.

Standon squirmed as well as he could, but could not move. He threw his head about, twisted his face, groaned now and then as though in agony. The señorita laughed long and loudly, and after a time she got up and danced toward him again, around him, mocking him when she came to a stop before him.

"Automatic—under big tree," she whispered, between her spells of laughter. "Wait until—you're sure—ropes will drop off. Take rope with you."

Standon understood now. But he wondered whether it would work. He had heard great tales of those big black ants, yet it seemed to him that they never would eat through the rope. It was wound around him like thread on a spool, and once it was broken, of course, the rest would be easy. Pretending to squirm under the torture of the ants, he could loosen the ropes, throw them from him,

and make a dash for freedom. There was a chance of a bullet striking him down, of course.

The señorita seemed to tire of the fun, of Standon's mock groans and his head tossing. She chatted with the guard about other things, principally whether Garabito contemplated an expedition against Monterey and Tampico, she yawned once or twice, and made the remark that she would have to be up at dawn to take her turkeys out for their feeding. And then she indicated that she was going to the hut to get some sleep.

The guard tried to detain her, for he was lonesome and he knew none of the men would approach, since Garabito never allowed his men to bother the one who guarded the stake. But the girl had to go, she said. She watched Standon a moment longer, then laughed and bade the guard good night, and hurried away across the clearing.

The guard made himself comfortable on the ground, rolled and lighted a cigarette, and wished for the hundredth time that José Garabito had picked some other man for this job. Standon tossed his head as before, and groaned now and then, nor was it all play. The ants were fighting over the molasses-covered rope. Some of them had strayed from the back, and two had settled on Standon's face. It was not all acting now when he tossed his head and groaned.

He watched the guard carefully, afraid the man might approach to make an investigation, but he did not. He was far too comfortable, and he was dreaming that Garabito would make another big raid, and



that there would be an abundance of loot. He looked at Standon every few seconds, he watched the fires in the distance, and thought least of all of the prisoner making an escape.

The minutes seemed as hours to Standon. In reality, it was no more than an hour until, tugging with his arms, he felt the ropes give a trifle. Hope came to him now. If he could get free of the ropes, if he could reach the big tree at the edge of the brush and get the automatic, if he could reach the little rushing creek before the moon came out, then he could get to the hidden mouth of the cave, and he would be safe. Once in the creek in the darkness, not all Garabito's bandits could find him.

But he knew that the ants were still working, and that it was not yet time to make the attempt. He did not want to try and fail, for that would mean the end. He owed it to Señorita Bianca Flores now to succeed.

Another half an hour passed. He felt the ropes give more. He thrust out his elbows and gained slack. The guard seemed to be drowsy, seemed to be satisfied that the prisoner was safe.

Standon felt the coils of rope loosening. They began slipping down the side of his body as he wiggled his arms. His neck was free, but there was a knot on the loop around his ankles. Was that to hold him?

He lifted one foot as soon as the ropes were loose enough to allow him to bend his knees. Watching the guard carefully, still pretending to be suffering from the bites of the ants, he twisted the foot,



bent it, pulled it up an inch at a time, caught the heel over the loop, and finally got the foot out of it. He knew that it would be an easy matter to get the other free at the final moment.

Now he waited until the guard rolled another cigarette. He waited until the man struck a match and held it to the cigarette's tip, until the flame of it was in his eyes. And then Standon gave a mighty wrench, freed himself of the ropes, kicked out the other foot, grasped the ropes with one hand, lifted them around his waist, and bolted toward the big tree at the edge of the clearing.

The astonished guard sprang to his feet, shrieked, fired the rifle. But Standon was dodging from side to side, and the bullet whistled past his head. The camp was in an instant uproar. Men came charging into the clearing from the fires down by the creek. José Garabito ran from his hut, shrieking to know the cause of the tumult. Ben Tarker and the other officers rushed to the scene, half believing that there was an attack by the men from the cup in the hills.

The guard fired again—and again—and missed the flying target. Standon, almost to the tree, tripped over the ropes, and was compelled to kick them off. He darted into the brush, found the automatic, and fired two swift shots toward his nearest pursuers.

Then he was in the brush and charging through it, careless whether he made a noise. He came to the creek and splashed into it. And then he went forward carefully, yet as swiftly as he could, keep-

ing in the water and making for the mouth of the cave.

Behind him, Garabito's men were firing at random into the brush and flashing their electric torches. Officers were shrieking at the men and at one another. They followed to the creek, spread out, began searching the brush. John Standon, up the side of the hill near the mouth of the cave, stood and watched the lights for a time, and then crawled through the entrance.

Back in the clearing, a cursing José Garabito was shrieking at the guard.

"I do not know how it happened, general!" the guard declared. "I was watching him all the time."

"Who went near him?" Garabito demanded.

"Nobody but the turkey herder. I did not go within fifteen feet of the stake myself."

"What did the turkey herder do?"

"She was mocking him, general. She got black ants and put them on his face, and we watched him toss his head and squirm. It was no fault of mine, general! You know me for a loyal man."

"But there has been a fault!" Garabito declared. "The turkey herder had no knife to cut the ropes?"

"I would have seen it, general. She had nothing but ants; she showed me."

One of the men came running up. "Here are the ropes, general," he said.

Garabito took them and examined them close by the fire. The first glance showed him that they had not been cut. He examined them better, and suddenly cursed.

"Molasses!" he said. "Molasses and ants! They would eat through solid rock if it had molasses on it!" He whirled toward some of his men. "Get the turkey girl, and fetch her here!" he commanded.

Bianca had foreseen such a thing; that was why she had told Standon to carry away the ropes. From her hut she had watched Standon's flight, and had rejoiced that he had got away. And now she saw a squad of men coming toward the hut, and guessed what had happened. And she still had molasses on her hands.

She darted back into the hut and barred the door. She found a piece of cloth and wiped her hands, dipped them in water and wiped them again, then dusted them with ashes from the fireplace. She had some molasses in a jar, and she seized the jar quickly and hid it beneath a rock in a corner of the hut. Then she waited for the knock at the door.

Their torches flashed in her face as she opened it, and they saw her yawning and looking at them sleepy-eyed.

"The general wants you!" one of them said.

She went with them willingly, chatting with them, yawning and complaining of the loss of sleep. José Garabito's face was like a thundercloud when she stopped before him.

"Explain this!" he commanded. "You were the only one to be near the prisoner. You put ants on him, according to the guard."

"To see him squirm," she said.

"And there was molasses on the ropes, and the ants ate through them."

"Ants like molasses."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Does the general mean that he thinks I helped the hated Americano to escape?" she demanded.

"Does Señor José Garabito say that the turkey herder is a traitor? Why should I do such a thing, señor? What could this Americano be to me?"

"Consider how it looks," Garabito said. "His bonds are broken, and there is a weapon ready for him at the edge of the clearing."

"Where would a turkey herder get a weapon, señor?" she asked. "The general is not considering this thing fully, perhaps. If he seeks the guilty one, suppose he stops annoying a poor girl who must get some sleep, and looks for a man who wanted the prisoner free. Is there any such, señor? Perhaps some man who wanted you to let the Americano go? What officer superintended the binding of this man to the stake?"

José Garabito looked closely at her, and then whirled toward the others. His face was like a thundercloud again.

Ben Tarker had superintended the binding of the prisoner! Ben Tarker had tried to get him set free! Ben Tarker could have smeared molasses on the rope easily when inspecting the prisoner's bonds! And Ben Tarker even now had a look on his face that was almost a gloating expression. He was thinking that the Americano had escaped, and that

he was the man, according to Carlos, who was to kill José Garabito.

Bianca stood aside, yawning and sniffing, and muttering more about losing her sleep. She felt that she had succeeded; she had made Garabito believe that Tarker was the traitor. She was still playing the game to divide the enemy, to get the bandits fighting among themselves.

"Tarker!" José Garabito's voice snapped like the lash of a whip.

"Here, señor!" Ben Tarker replied.

"You are under arrest!" Garabito exclaimed, as though Ben Tarker had been no more than the rawest recruit.

"Indeed?" Tarker sneered. "And under arrest for what?"

"I shall make a thorough investigation of this affair. You wanted me to release the Americano, and you also were the officer in charge when he was bound to the stake. There have been too many things happen recently."

"Do you mean to insinuate——" Ben Tarker began, glancing around quickly to locate his friends.

"You are under arrest, I said. We'll have no present argument about it. I command here! Some seem inclined to forget that. Go to your quarters, Señor Tarker, and remain until morning! I shall put a guard over you!"

"You would dare?" Ben Tarker shrieked. "It happens that I have friends in camp!"

"But I command!" José Garabito declared sternly. He whipped his revolver from its holster, and there

were those near who expected to see him send a bullet crashing into Ben Tarker's body. Ben Tarker himself half expected it, and prepared to fight it out.

A score more weapons quickly made their appearance. This was a crisis in the affairs of José Garabito, and some there were who were loyal to him, and others dissatisfied. Some of the men darted to Ben Tarker's side to show where they stood. And for the third time the clash between José Garabito and his chief officer was averted.

Beyond the creek, a volley rang out suddenly. Bullets whistled across the clearing. The men down by the fires sprang to their feet, clutching at their weapons and cartridge belts. A chorus of war cries from the brush told them that the enemy was at hand. The men from the cup in the hills had tried a night attack.

## CHAPTER XVII

### DISCOVERY

**G**ARABITO and Ben Tarker forgot their differences, and so did their friends, when the bullets began to sweep across the clearing. Here was a common enemy against whom they could join hands to fight. If they did not, they might be wiped out.

Being small in numbers, those in the cup could not risk a pitched battle. But on several occasions they had rushed down the pass when least expected, attended to the few guards at the bottom and harassed the camp of the bandits. Once or twice they had resorted to the torch and had fired huge quantities of supplies and ammunition that Garabito's men had gathered during a raid on several ranches and mines.

This night attack was of the same order. They merely intended to do what damage they could, and then retreat slowly up the pass, keeping off the enemy, until they came to the narrow entrance where an army could be held off by half a dozen men.

Their shrill war cries rang out, their volleys swept lower and claimed victims, José Garabito began roaring his orders in a loud voice, and Ben Tarker and the other officers saw that they were carried out.

The bandits dashed from the clearing into the brush and fought under cover, gradually working



their way toward the creek. They knew that the men from the cup would not cross the creek, and that they would have to wade through it and dislodge the enemy on the other side. They would pass the line of camp fires, and for a moment or so would be excellent targets.

None of the bandits relished the situation, but they knew what had to be done. Their officers were shrieking at them, and they worked their way carefully toward the creek, preparing for a sudden dash across it and into the brush on the other side. There a clash would come, and then the men from the cup would retreat, possibly with one casualty to Garabito's dozen. It was this method of fighting that made Garabito eager to drive the men from the hills, that made him furious when he remembered that in some peculiar manner his foes were getting ammunition.

Standon had reached the cave and told Don Felipe and Doña Inez of his experiences, and of how Bianca had saved him. Carlos had not put in an appearance, and they did not know where he happened to be. They heard the firing, and hurried to the slits in the wall to see what was taking place.

"The men from the hills!" Don Felipe gasped. "Garabito's men will have to cross the creek and drive them back. It is another of their unexpected attacks. Those are the things that worry our pretty king of bandits!"

"And now," said Standon, "I can get some horses."

"Señor Standon, it is dangerous. You had one close call to-night, and it may be better——"

"They are not thinking of the horses now," Standon said. "They are busy fighting the men from the cup. If only Carlos were here, we might get as many as we need."

Don Felipe went with him to the mouth of the cave, and they found Carlos just coming to them. Standon and the hunchback hurried away down the creek, and Don Felipe went to tell the refugees that there still might be a chance of getting away.

Standon and Carlos were cautious, but there was scant need of it. Carlos explained that he had watched and listened while Garabito was examining Bianca, told how she had thrown suspicion on Ben Tarker, and said that she had gone to her hut when the firing began. The men from the cup in the hills knew of the hut, and would not fire toward it.

They came to the picket lines to find the horses plunging and snorting; all the horse guards were down by the creek joining in the fighting. Stray bullets were whistling through the brush, but they were forced to chance them. They worked rapidly, getting eight fine animals and as many saddles and bridles, and before Garabito's men succeeded in dashing across the creek and driving their foes from the brush, Standon and Carlos were leading their horses through the creek toward the rendezvous.

An hour later, they saw the last of the refugees ride away through the tiny pass, Carlos on his wild mule guiding them.

"Thank the saints we have sent all of our friends on their way," Don Felipe said. "And thank the

saints also that our own horses are in excellent condition in the cave. We may have need of them soon. If Bianca is under suspicion, we may have to get out of the neighborhood."

They watched again from the slit in the rock wall. The battle was at an end, save for fitful firing from the brush now and then, where one of Garabito's men heard a sound and imagined an enemy was upon him. Garabito had lost heavily and was in an ugly humor. Several of his officers had been killed, including two men he looked upon as particularly loyal to him. He ordered immediate burials, ordered guards placed again, and became once more the careful general, now that the damage was done.

Word was carried to him of the theft of the horses, and the bandit chief raged. The Americano was doing it, he declared. And where was he taking the horses, that they disappeared so quickly? On the morrow he would send squads through all the neighboring territory in search of a trail.

Garabito paced back and forth in his hut, gathering his anger. He would bring order out of chaos or die in the attempt, he told himself. The organization was going to pieces!

He sent for Ben Tarker and a couple more officers, and when they had arrived—Tarker sneering and the others wondering what was going to happen—he kept them waiting for a time while he stood in the doorway looking over the clearing and trying to make up his mind just what to say and do.

Tarker felt a little fear of his chief now, and there were many things that seemed peculiar to him.

He was beginning to have an inkling of the truth of the situation. When Garabito turned and came back to the table in the middle of the room, Ben Tarker stepped up to him and saluted.

"General," he said, "I feel that there are some things should be explained."

"You are right!" Garabito snapped.

"Things cannot go on this way. Unless we trust each other, we can do nothing."

"Have you anything to suggest?" Garabito asked, watching him closely.

"Our camp appears to me to be unsafe. Understand, I am not trying to criticize your leadership. Those devils up in the hills must be driven out."

"You tried it while I was in Chihuahua, and did nothing but lose fifteen men."

Tarker's face flushed darkly at the sarcasm. He took a step nearer the table.

"They would not last long if they did not get ammunition," he said. "We have examined the place thoroughly, as the general knows. It is a little cup, and the only way in is by a narrow pass some hundred yards long, where a dozen men could keep off a regiment from now until doomsday—as long as they had supplies. There are only two ways in which this ammunition can reach them—either by airplane or up that little pass."

"We know that!"

"And there has been no airplane; we know that, too. So the cartridges have gone up the pass. But the pass is narrow, and the mouth of it and the ground before it has been guarded carefully. One

of your most trusted officers has been in command there, and is at his wits' end to know how the stuff gets by."

"Tell me news!" Garabito said.

"The loyalty of the men there is beyond question. So it is merely a case of something being overlooked."

"Have you any explanation?" Garabito asked, looking up at him quickly.

"There are spies at work, of course. Who they are, and where they are hiding, are things we do not know. Nor do we know how that ammunition is sent in, but it is."

"This conversation seems to be getting us nowhere," José Garabito said. "And I believe we still have an investigation to make concerning yourself."

"I overlook what the general did in a moment of anger," Ben Tarker said. "It is true that I suggested the Americano be released, or that you force him to fight you. But I had nothing to do with setting him free. If the general will stop to think, he will see that I would not have done such a thing in such a clumsy manner. The turkey girl was the only one who went near him. The guard is a trusted man. And the Americano knew just where to pick up a weapon in the dark. She must have whispered to him when he was at the stake; she must have smeared the molasses on the ropes. We know that she put the ants on him."

"It is almost beyond belief how you wish to annoy a poor girl who herds turkeys!" Garabito said,

sneering again. "Is it that you tried to make love to her and were repulsed?"

"She bears herself like a lady at times," Ben Tarker said. "And we really are taking her for granted. I ask you, general, to call off my arrest for the time being. Let me watch this girl from a distance, and see whether I can discover anything. If she is in league with the Americano and others, we——"

"If there are many in the vicinity, where are they?"

"That is something we must discover, general. But it stands to reason that they are in the vicinity. Look at the horses we have lost night after night, with their equipment. Those horses have been taken for some certain reason. It is my belief, general, that the prisoners are not buried alive in the hill, that there is a way out the other side through some cave, and that the horses have been stolen for them, that they might get away."

"There may be something in that," said Garabito, with more kindness than he had exhibited before. "One thing is certain, I'm not going to endure this turmoil much longer. If we remain here, those men in the cup must be cleared away. I give you permission, Señor Tarker, to watch the turkey girl for a time. But you are to do so from a distance, are to make no move against her unless you see something suspicious. We do not want to anger the peons and have them turn against us. I have explained that their friendship is essential to us. And you are to conduct yourself properly meanwhile. I expect you

to show me that you are beyond question a loyal man, and that I have been wrong to think otherwise. That is all!"

Tarker and the others left the hut and scattered, Tarker going toward his own habitation near the bank of the creek. He thought that he had played Garabito well. He had gained time, and he could work further with the men and turn them to him. When he felt that he was strong enough, he would strike.

The dawn came, and the men were busy around the camp, straightening things after the battle, cooking their meals, exercising their muscles, practicing marksmanship, shouting and laughing, joking and quarreling.

Carlos, who had returned from seeing the last of the refugees on their way, and had had a couple of hours of sleep, came to Bianca's hut, rubbing his eyes and yawning, and found her in the turkey corral. They talked in whispers.

"They got away?" she asked.

"All of them, señorita," Carlos replied. "And Don Felipe says that you are to be very careful, since you have come under suspicion. Soon we may have to ride for the border ourselves, and it will be a long and perilous journey."

"And our friends in the hills?" she asked.

"Don Felipe has not decided. Perhaps a message shall be sent to them. Things are approaching a crisis, Don Felipe says."

"And what does the big Americano say?"

"He says nothing, señorita; he sleeps. He said



last night, however, when we were getting the horses, that there was but one worthy señorita in all the world, and that she had put big black ants upon him."

"Carlos!" she cried, blushing furiously.

"Oh, he loves you, señorita—there can be no doubt of it!"

"Carlos, you must not talk that way."

"And what are you going to do now?" Carlos asked.

"Herd the turkeys," she replied. "There is a reason."

"I do not doubt it," he said. "Our friends shot away a lot of ammunition last night and got many of Garabito's men. How large is the flock now?"

"More than a hundred fine birds, Carlos."

"If we have to go away, you'll have to leave them behind."

"I shall hate that," she said. "They are good birds, and they mind so well. And now you had better run away, Carlos."

"I want my sword," he said. "Garabito will be issuing orders to everybody this morning, and I want to look like an officer so he will not forget and make me work."

"It is inside the hut, near the door."

Carlos got the sword and buckled it on. Then he put his battered sombrero jauntily on one side of his head, and started to swagger across the clearing toward the headquarters hut. Señorita Bianca Flores laughed as she watched him.

The señorita clucked to the turkeys, and they

gathered around her. Then she opened the little gate in the corral and let them out. They milled like cattle for a few minutes, and then, when she clucked at them again, and started to skirt the edge of the clearing, they followed her like children, the gobblers stopping now and then to gobble, the hens pecking at the ground.

Señor Ben Tarker had been sitting before the door of his hut watching her from a distance. It came to his mind now that generally after the men from the cup had made a raid, the señorita took out her turkeys and let them graze. And she crossed the creek with them at a place where two fallen trees made a sort of bridge, and took them into the brush on the other side. Those turkeys even grazed up the narrow pass that led to the cup in the hills, and came back when she called them. While they grazed, the señorita talked with the guards.

Suddenly Ben Tarker sat up straight and gave an exclamation that meant he had thought of something that should have occurred to him long before. He slapped his knees with his palms, grinned, then reconsidered, fearing he was making a wild guess. He called two of the men nearest to him, and issued his orders quickly.

"And it must be done quietly," he said. "The señorita must not suspect. I do not want to anger her and Garabito, if my guess is a poor one."

The men took to the brush, and Ben Tarker walked slowly across the clearing so as to intercept the turkey herder. Her face darkened for a moment when she saw him.

"I had thought that you were under arrest in your quarters," she said.

"The general has thought better of it, señorita. He was very angry, of course, because the Americano got away. And it was a peculiar thing. I was almost persuaded myself that you had contrived the escape."

"Why should I help an Americano?"

"I do not know," Ben Tarker said frankly. "There have been some very unusual things happen recently. Where are you going now, señorita, if I may ask?"

"To herd my turkeys across the creek and up into the mouth of the little pass," she said. "There is good food in the brush there. I hope you left no dead men there last night, Señor Tarker, for they always frighten my birds so."

"It is rather dangerous," Tarker observed. "Some of those aristocrats may catch you."

"But I never go past the guards," she replied. "Could not the guards protect me if the men in the hills made an attack?"

"Your turkeys go past the guards, however."

"Si, señor! They wander up the pass, eating. But if one of those men showed in the brush the birds would be frightened and hurry back to me. It would be a swift aristocrat who could catch one of them, señor."

"They might shoot a few. They probably have no more supplies than they need, and roast turkey is a fine dish."

"I have chanced it often, and never has one been

missing," she declared. "But I must get on, señor. The birds will be scattering, if I do not. I want to get them across the creek and into the brush before the sun gets too hot."

Ben Tarker stepped aside, and the señorita clucked to her turkeys and started on. Tarker went into the brush, and found the two men he had sent there.

They seemed to be excited.

"Look, señor!" one of them cried. "It is as you suspected. This is a pretty business, Señor Tarker!"

Ben Tarker looked, and an exclamation of delight and satisfaction came from him. The entire thing was explained now. Beneath each wing of the turkey his men had caught and held quiet, a clip of cartridges had been fastened.

So that was the way in which the men in the cup got their ammunition! The turkey herder fastened the cartridges beneath the wings of her fowls and herded them up the little pass. And up there the aristocrats seized the birds and took away the loot, and then released them again.

Tarker stepped into the clearing and blew his whistle, and a score of men came running. He issued his orders quickly. The men ran toward the creek, where Bianca was preparing to cross with the flock. They made her prisoner, and they rounded up all the turkeys, though it was a difficult task.

José Garabito came running from his hut at the sound of the tumult. He crossed to Ben Tarker rapidly.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "Why are you annoying this poor girl?"

"This poor girl, general," Tarker replied, grinning, "happens to be one of our worst enemies. I have discovered how ammunition gets to the men in the cup. Look here, general, beneath the wings of this turkey. Suppose we examine the rest of the birds. A hundred fowls can carry quite a quantity of cartridges in that manner. The men in the hills shot many last night, and this morning your turkey herder sends them a new supply. It is a pretty arrangement, but it has cost us a lot of trouble and many men!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A LONG-DISTANCE SHOT

SEÑORITA BIANCA FLORES knew what fear was for a moment, when José Garabito looked at her from his flashing eyes and then turned to the men who had rounded up the turkeys.

They held her safely at one side, while the birds were taken before the general one at a time, examined, and the cartridges taken from them and piled before him. From one bird they took an empty cartridge shell that contained a message to the men in the hills. That was the way information was sent.

Bianca gradually regained some of her courage while this examination was going on. It came to her that she was a Flores, that these men were the scum of the earth, and that what she had done had been in defense of honest folk against murderers and thieves. She tossed her head proudly, and save for her clothing she was not a turkey girl, but an aristocratic young lady who knew how to handle her inferiors.

The examination at an end, Garabito ordered the turkeys released and Bianca conducted to the headquarters hut. There he gathered his officers and started his examination of the girl.

"Señorita," he said, "it seems that you are a traitor to our cause."

"How can I be, when your cause was never mine?" she asked. "You may call me a prisoner of war, and nothing more."

"And why not a spy," he asked, "since you have been here with us all the time under false pretenses. So you have been cursing the aristocrats and Americanos, yet have been helping them! Those cartridges you have been sending to the men in the hills have caused many of my men to die."

"Say, rather, that they have caused a set of murderers and thieves to be executed," she said.

"So that is the way in which you look at it? Who are you, señorita?"

"Bianca Flores," she replied proudly.

"What is this? Relation of Doña Inez?"

"Her niece, señor."

"The most damnable of all the aristocrats, and here in my camp posing as a herder of turkeys. I grant you, señorita, that you played the part well. But it is likely to cost you dear. We have a way of settling things with aristocratic women!"

Bianca's face flushed and then turned pale. "It is well known," she said. "José Garabito and his men are known as beasts throughout the land."

"You are scarcely in a position to talk in such a manner," he warned her. "It will not help you."

"I expect no help in this place," she said.

"So you have been fooling us all the time, eh? I suppose you released the Americano?"

"I did, señor, if you wish to know. I made a fool of the guard, of all of you."

"And how came he here?"



"Why, he escaped from Chihuahua with Doña Inez Flores and Don Felipe Mendoza. They are all within a short distance of you now, Señor José Garabito, but you cannot find them. It may interest you to know, also, that you buried no aristocrats in the mountain. They got out on the other side through a cave, and rode away on the horses stolen from your camp."

Garabito cursed horribly and acted as though he would strike her down, but held his hand. And she stood proudly before him, her head held high, her eyes flashing, not showing the fear that she felt.

"Can you imagine what we shall do with you?" Garabito asked.

"I suppose you will shoot me, señor," she replied. "It is the fortune of war. I have been caught, and there is a penalty for that."

"First you shall be bound to the iron stake and whipped with a mule whip," Garabito said. "You shall be whipped until the clothing is torn from your body."

Bianca looked around swiftly at the leering faces of Garabito's officers, at the face of Ben Tarker, her especial enemy. Then she jerked free of her guards and threw herself at the bandit.

"Order me shot, señor!" she begged. "Lead me out now, and have an end of it!"

"It would be too easy," he replied.

"I implore you, señor——"

"That is right, aristocrat!" he said, sneering. "Get down on your pretty knees and beg José Gara-

bito for a favor. That is what all aristocrats should do."

She sprang to her feet again, her eyes blazing. "I would die before I'd ask a favor of you!" she cried. "You shall not whip me, either."

"What is to prevent?"

"I can take my own life. Never doubt that I will find a way!" she cried. "I'll win from you in the end! Murderer and thief! Leader of thugs and beasts! Already, the end of your life draws near!"

"What is this—more of the prophecies of Carlos?" Garabito asked, laughing. "I do not fear them, you see. And I do not believe them—as some might." He glanced at Ben Tarker as he spoke. "You shall be tied to the stake and whipped immediately," he ordered. "Tarker, see to it!"

"You shall be obeyed, general."

"Not too much of the lash. We do not want her to die too soon, understand. Just let her feel the sting of it. The indignity will hurt as much as the blows. Take her out; call me when everything is ready. I shall have the first blow myself."

She did not resist as the guards grasped her arms and led her from the hut. Once outside, she tried to twist free, but found that she could not. They hurried her to the stake and began fastening her there, using the chains, and leaving her back clear of them. Ben Tarker stood at one side superintending the operation, and leering at her. The other officers and scores of men were standing near, laughing at her, making coarse jests. Her face was flaming, and she was near to tears. But she remembered that she was

Bianca Flores, and choked the tears back, and her lips curled in scorn as she looked at them.

Carlos was aware of the state of affairs, of course. He knew that everything was at an end. He had left the camp immediately, and had hurried along the creek and to the hidden entrance of the cave. It did not take him long to reach Doña Inez and Don Felipe, and his story caused Standon to be awakened.

They forced Doña Inez to remain where she was, and Standon and Don Felipe, followed by Carlos, hurried to the slit in the rock wall, from where they could look down into the clearing of the camp.

"What can we do?" Don Felipe moaned. "It is my fault for ever letting her do such a thing and run such a risk. We must save her in some way. There is no question what her fate will be. It would be better to shoot her down than——"

They saw the bandits leading her to the stake and fastening her there. They saw one of the men running toward it with a mule whip.

"They are going to whip her—whip a Flores!" Don Felipe cried. "Señor Standon, we cannot endure that. She will die with the indignity at the first blow of the whip. Think of it! A whip across her little, delicate back!"

Standon was thinking of it. Rage filled his heart and his face was white. He would have gone into the clearing and fought them all, but he knew that would avail nothing. They would merely shoot him down and then go ahead with the whipping.

"We must spare her that!" Don Felipe was saying. "I am an old man, and my eyesight is no longer

good. Standon, be our friend once again. It is a terrible thing to ask, but I call upon you to do it. Take the rifle, and shoot! Shoot the señorita!"

"No—no!" Standon cried.

"It is the only way. She would welcome it, Standon! Slay her, señor, before those beasts can touch her with the whip. Spare her the whipping and what is to follow. She will thank you for it!"

"I cannot!" Standon said. "But possibly I can pick off some of the men around the stake. They would have difficulty sending a bullet through this narrow slit at the distance. And we can keep them from getting in."

"In such case, señor, they will but take her into one of the huts, and then you'll be unable to reach her with the shot of mercy. It were best to shoot her as she stands at the stake. See, señor, her back is toward us. A single careful shot will be enough. If I had my eyesight, I'd do it myself, and know that it would be a favor. She is a martyr if she goes unsoiled to her grave. Shoot, señor!"

She was securely bound, now, and the men were standing back. And then José Garabito hurried from the headquarters hut and picked up the whip.

"That beast is going to do it himself!" Don Felipe said. "For the love of Heaven, señor, shoot her now! In a moment, it will be too late!"

Standon picked up the high-powered rifle, moaned once, and then thrust the muzzle through the slit in the rock. Carlos was whimpering behind him. Don Felipe turned away and began to pray.

Standon acted mechanically now. He adjusted the

sight, allowed for the slight wind, leveled the weapon and rested it against the rock, and aimed carefully. His face was still white, but his hands did not shake.

The bandits stepped back more, and Garabito went forward, the whip held ready. He was saying something to Bianca, taunting her, perhaps. He braced himself, gathered up the whip, drew it back.

John Standon fired. The roar of the shot filled the passage and the smoke poured back into it with the wind.

Down in the clearing there was the thud of a bullet striking home, the ringing of the explosion, a shrill cry of pain, then a chorus of exclamations of surprise and rage. José Garabito dropped the whip, tried to put a hand to his breast, swayed a moment, and then crashed to the ground.

"You missed?" Don Felipe asked.

"No, señor, I reached the target," Standon replied. "José Garabito never will whip her now."

Don Felipe rushed to the slit in the wall.

"You shot Garabito!" he cried. "Shot him instead of the señorita! And now——"

"Now we will watch," Standon said. "If Garabito is dead, the señorita will be forgotten for a time. Tarker will be trying to take command. And they will give us some attention."

They were doing that already. Guns spoke in the clearing below, and bullets pattered harmlessly against the rock face of the cliff. The men were scattering, taking cover, looking up at the cliff and shooting wildly. Ben Tarker already was shrieking his orders.

Two men carried Garabito toward the headquarters hut.

Standon fired again, for the pure love of it now, and brought down another man. He had fired at Ben Tarker, but the bullet had missed and gone by to strike a soldier. And now Don Felipe grasped another rifle, ran to the slit in the rock, and started pouring shots down at the bandits.

"We should have thought of this before," he said. "We could have picked off some every day, and they never can get to us here. We could bury ourselves for a couple of months; there is food and ammunition enough."

Bianca had been left at the stake. Standon looked down at her and decided that she had fainted. The bandits did not seem to be thinking of her now. They were bombarding the rock wall, wondering who had fired from there and how they could find the way in. They appreciated that the men inside the hill commanded the entire camp.

Carlos had ceased his whimpering and was standing at one of the tiny apertures looking out. There was but one thought in Carlos' mind now. It had come out as he had prophesied, Señor Standon had killed José Garabito.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE WILD CHARGE

SUDDENLY they heard Doña Inez calling them, and Don Felipe left Standon at the slit and ran down the passage toward her. Beside her was a young man in tattered clothing, and with a heavy beard on his face. Don Felipe stared at him in surprise and reached for the automatic that swung against his hip.

"Do not shoot, Don Felipe!" the newcomer called. "Do you not recognize me? Are my tattered clothes and heavy beard too much for you? We have trouble keeping in shape in the cup in the hills."

"Benito!" Don Felipe shouted. "Juan Benito!"

"The same, señor, at your service."

Juan Benito was one of the leaders of the men in the cup, but Don Felipe marveled that he was here. Benito was quick to explain it.

"We found a cave and a passage not long since," he said, "and we have been exploring it, thinking that possibly it would give us a safe way to reach the bandits' camp. I happened to run into another passage and found my way here, and almost frightened the good Doña Inez into hysterics, I believe."

"And you came at the crisis," Don Felipe said. "They have captured Bianca, they know how you got your ammunition. They have tied her to the stake



in the clearing. They were going to whip her, but Señor Standon put a stop to that. He has shot Garabito!"

"Shot Garabito!" Benito gasped.

"And the bandits are firing at our rock wall, forgetting the señorita for the time being. Strike while they are demoralized, Benito, and try to save her. Your horses are in good condition?"

"The best!"

"Hurry back and get all your men. Ride down the pass and charge through the camp. Scatter the bandits and their mounts. You may lose men, but it is to save Bianca, who has done so much for us. Ride through the camp, pick her up if you can, and then make for the open country and the border. You cannot remain in the cup longer."

"*Dios!*" Benito exclaimed.

"Act quickly before the bandits are organized again. They will be fighting among themselves; Ben Tarker will be trying to take the supreme command. It is the only way, Benito. You must get out of the hills. A wild ride through the camp, and away you go."

"And you?"

"We'll continue firing from the wall until you and your men ride into the camp. Then we can get away. Our horses are in condition, and the bandits cannot find their way into the hill. We'll slip away at night, go through the pass, and reach the border on the other side of the range of hills. Go!"

Juan Benito waited to hear no more. He saluted Doña Inez politely and dashed down one of the dark

passages. Don Felipe turned to hurry back to Standon. "Remain here, Doña Inez," he said. "If there is any news, I'll bring it you."

"You'll save her?"

"We'll do our best! Señor Standon will do everything in his power—and that will be much. He may not know it, but he loves Bianca Flores!"

Don Felipe rushed back through the passage, where he found Standon firing coolly and deliberately through the slit, and Carlos gone. Standon had a method now. He was keeping all the bandits away from the stake in the center of the clearing. For the most part, they were willing to remain under cover in the brush, but now and then one started toward the stake as though to unfasten the señorita and get her into one of the huts. Standon watched those men, and dropped them as soon as they started.

The officers were shrieking at their men, and they could see several squads hurrying through the brush toward the creek.

"Trying to find the way in," Don Felipe said. "A lot of good it will do them! They have some territory to cover if they investigate the entire range of hills. Keep up the firing, señor, and I'll do what I can. We'll keep their attention for a time, until the men can come down from the hills. Where is Carlos?"

"He slipped away a few minutes ago, Don Felipe."

"He would have been useful had he remained; he could have loaded rifles for us. Thank the saints we have plenty of ammunition. Have any bullets entered here?"

"Not one," Standon replied. "But the face of the rock has been well covered with them." He took careful aim and fired again, and dropped another man who had started for the stake.

There was confusion in the camp. Tarker and some of the other officers had gone into the headquarters hut, and José Garabito had died with a curse on his lips. Ben Tarker immediately began issuing his orders, but one of the others stopped him.

"We elect our new leader," he said.

"Do you aspire to the position?" Tarker demanded, threateningly.

"No, señor, but we officers have the right to elect."

"I was Garabito's chief lieutenant," Tarker told them. "We have no time now to hold an election. You will take my commands until this thing is straightened out, and then the election can be held."

They growled a bit, but decided it was the best thing to do. So Ben Tarker ordered squads to make their way through the brush along the side of the hill and search for a cave. "These hills are honey-combed with passages," he declared. "We know how our prisoners escaped. Find the entrance, and we'll have these people in a trap. I think there are not more than three or four—possibly that Americano and Don Felipe Mendoza and a few others."

"How about the girl?" one of them asked.

"Leave her at the stake for the present. She is safe there. Risk no men trying to get her away. Those devils in the hill can pick us off one at a time as long as they have cartridges."

He issued an avalanche of orders, and the officers

rushed to carry them out. They were eager to put an end to the man who had slain Garabito, and to any who might be with him, that the election might be held. Not one but had ambitions and plans for campaigns that had been at variance with those of Garabito.

They maintained the fire at the rock face of the hill, but did no damage. Whereas, Standon and Don Felipe peppered them freely, and now and then one of the men in the brush gave a scream, threw up his arms and fell. Ben Tarker was enraged at the situation. He knew that his men were wasting their cartridges, but there seemed to be nothing else for them to do.

The sun was blazing down upon the clearing now. Bianca regained consciousness, and wondered what was happening. She tried to get free, and found that she could not. She saw the men firing from the brush, and knew that the fire was being returned, but she could not, even by twisting her head, see what was happening behind her. She only guessed that Standon and Don Felipe, and perhaps Carlos, were firing through the slits in the wall.

She began wondering how it would end. Her friends commanded the clearing, of course, but sooner or later the bandits would get her away from the stake and to one of the huts. She only hoped that she would be able to take her own life.

Then she saw Carlos. The hunchback was slipping through the brush, careful to keep under cover. He wore the sword Garabito had given him, and seemed to be pretending that he was an officer directing his

men under fire. Bianca guessed that there was a reason in his pretense, and she wondered what it could be.

Carlos reached a place in the brush directly in front of her and less than fifty feet away. She hoped that he would undertake nothing foolish, such as an attempt at rescue, for she knew that he would be shot down before he could get her free.

Ben Tarker was in the brush now, trying to direct the fire, begging his sharpshooters to use care and try to put bullets through the tiny slit high up in the wall.

Suddenly there was a chorus of shrill cries from the creek, and the bandits turned to find wild horsemen charging through the water and into the clearing. The men from the cup had come on their wild ride of rescue and their attempt to reach freedom.

They dashed through the brush and among the huts, shouting and shooting wildly, setting fire to the huts, running down the bandits, trying to stampede the horses and mules of the camp. From the brush, volleys were poured at them. Here and there a man fell and his riderless horse plunged about to add to the confusion. It was a wild onslaught, meant to terrify by its very wildness, where it was every man for himself in a forlorn hope. Juan Benito had issued orders that Bianca be rescued, that his men do as much damage as possible, and then ride toward the east to the highway, making a running fight of it, and so reach the border.

Bianca saw Carlos dart from the brush and toward her. Even as he began working to unfasten the

chains, half a dozen horsemen dashed to the stake. They surrounded it, covered Carlos as he worked. Bullets were flying around them now, singing past the señorita's head, here and there striking a target.

At last she was free, and strong arms grasped her and lifted her up behind one of the men. On they dashed across the clearing, scattering the turkeys, charging straight at the brush. Carlos had grasped a stirrup and was running beside a plunging horse, giving great leaps and scarcely touching the ground, his sword flying out beside him.

They came to the edge of the brush, and Bianca bent her head to dodge the limbs of the trees along the creek. Each instant she expected to feel the hot sting of a bullet in her back. And then the horse plunged forward, sending her flying over his head and crashing into the brush.

Its rider had gone down, too. Carlos was in the brush a short distance away, and hurrying toward her. Between them and the bandits were a dozen of Benito's men, still fighting.

Carlos grasped her hand. "This way, señorita!" he cried.

He dragged her through the brush and into the creek. They ran as swiftly as they could through the shallow water. From the distance some of the bandits fired at them, and missed. And then, almost before Bianca realized it, they were crawling into the little hole in the side of the hill, and a few minutes later she was sobbing on Doña Inez' breast.

## CHAPTER XX

### SANCTUARY

LEAVING their dead behind, Juan Benito's men rode on through the brush and toward the highway that ran into the north. Benito had made sure that Carlos had taken Bianca to safety, and after that it was a case of every man for himself, in truth.

Down in the clearing, the bandits were collecting, keeping to the brush, maintaining a fire directed at the rock wall. Ben Tarker was still issuing orders as though he relished it. His squads were combing the side of the hill again, searching for the entrance to the cave, and looked almost everywhere save in the right direction.

"We shall be all right if they do not locate our horses," Don Felipe said to Standon. "There is nothing now except to ride toward the border."

"Don Felipe," Standon said, "just across the border are several thousand acres that belong to an uncle of mine, and of which I shall have half if I live to reach home. You will come with me, and Doña Inez and the señorita, and at my uncle's ranch we can all rest and try to forget these horrors. You will be more than welcome. Afterward, you can go to El Paso and attend to your business."

"Senor Standon, I thank you and accept the invitation on behalf of all," Don Felipe said.



There was some semblance of order in the camp of the bandits now. José Garabito's flag, a blue square with a spearhead in white upon it, had been lowered from the headquarters hut. Ben Tarker had recalled the men who would have mounted and pursued Benito's followers. He knew it would be a senseless pursuit, and he did not care to divide his force. Above all, he wanted to capture the señorita again, and more especially Don Felipe. Tarker long had admired the señorita from afar, and now he intended to force his attentions upon her. As for Don Felipe, a firing squad would be in readiness. The same squad could care for the big Americano.

The opposition to Ben Tarker's leadership came to nothing; the other officers voted him their new chief, and conveyed word to the men. They reserved the right to change matters at any time it pleased them. Tarker already was busy with the plans for a big raid, knowing that their loyalty to him depended upon his success.

Throughout the long afternoon, Standon and Don Felipe remained at the slit in the rock, firing whenever they saw a target, and laughing at the efforts of the bandits to put a bullet through that tiny crack. Carlos had been sent to watch the rear entrance and give the alarm if the bandits accidentally discovered it. Bianca was with Doña Inez, recovering from her experience.

"It is a long ride to the border," Don Felipe said. "We cannot make it in a single night."

"True," Standon replied. "If the bandits follow us, we may have another fight on our hands. But

we may run into federal cavalry on that side of the range. If we do not, we shall have to ride during the night, hide throughout to-morrow, and finish the journey the night following. That thing is to be decided when we come to it."

Doña Inez cooked a hot meal, and they ate ravenously. Then the night descended, and Carlos slipped from the end of the passage and went toward the cave where the horses were hidden. He found his mule in the brush, where the animal had fled during the fighting, and tethered it near the cave.

Back he came, with the news that the horses were saddled and bridled and ready for the trip. He had seen no bandits, he reported, nor had he heard any. But it stood to reason that squads of them were in the brush near the base of the hill, and along the creek.

They looked for the last time around the cave that had meant so much to them, and then started through the passage toward the entrance.

"Señor Standon," Bianca said sweetly, "on this ride that we shall take presently, I'll be obliged if you look out for me. Don Felipe Mendoza will have eyes for nobody but my good aunt."

"Bianca!" Doña Inez exclaimed.

"And the Señorita Flores," Don Felipe interposed, "will have eyes for none but the big Americano who shot so well to save her."

"Don Felipe!" she cried, as though in anger; but she clung to Standon's hand. And Standon knew, then, that he loved the little señorita, and that he

could have some hope of winning her for his own. The thought gave him added courage.

They reached the little hole; Carlos crawled out first and the others followed. They were very careful now. The slightest alarm might spoil all their plans. It was terrible to think of disaster coming at the last moment.

The night was dark, and there was a slight mist, for which they were grateful. They crept along the edge of the creek, stopping now and then to listen for sounds that would indicate the presence of a foe. So they came to the cave, and rested for a time, while Carlos and Standon got out the horses.

"Don Felipe, may I ride with you through the pass?" Carlos asked.

"Why only through the pass?" Standon demanded. "Did you think, Carlos, that we would desert you after you have done so much? There is a place on my uncle's ranch for you, Carlos, forever. And I'll see to it that you are made happy there."

"I shall be happy, señor, if I can be near Bianca."

"It does not follow that a residence on Señor Standon's ranch would keep you near me," Bianca said.

"But it does, señorita!" Carlos declared. "I have talked with the stars about that, too."

Standon stopped him. "Sometimes it is not nice to look too far into the future," he said.

Now they mounted, and Carlos on his mule led the way up the side of the hill and toward the little pass through which he had guided the refugees. They went slowly, flinching at every rolling stone, at every

scraping of a horse's hoof on the loose gravel. Reaching the top of the first rise, they started across a level space toward the mouth of the pass.

But they were not to escape so easily. Out of the darkness to one side came a sudden challenge.

"Halt! Who's there?"

There was silence for a moment, then an electric torch flashed and a revolver cracked. A chorus of exclamations came to their ears.

Don Felipe roared an order, Carlos urged his wild mule into an instant gallop, and they followed him at breakneck speed, bending low over their horses. A volley came after them, and there were sounds of pursuit.

Like wild things they rode through the narrow pass, trusting to their horses, rode without rein after Carlos and his mule. It was so dark that they scarcely could see. Standon, riding last, fired behind repeatedly, but the sounds of pursuit continued.

They were climbing now—and now they were rushing down the slope on the other side, toward the broad highway. Bullets whistled past their heads frequently, so they knew that their pursuers were well mounted.

There was nothing to do except ride. It was useless to fight it out in the dark. And Standon had a fear of Bianca being wounded, or of one of their horses going down.

They struck a road and galloped along it. Now they were headed for the distant border, with only the long miles between them and safety.

"If we only can reach the river!" Standon thought.

But the river was miles away, more miles than could be covered in a single night of hard riding.

On they rushed through the night, now and then exchanging shots. Standon knew that the ride was cruel for the women. It was bad enough for him and for Don Felipe. It was easiest of all on Carlos and the wild mule.

Then they seemed to be distancing their pursuers. They slackened the pace a little, but remained on guard. Perhaps the bandits would give up the chase and return. Standon did not know that Ben Tarker had offered a rich reward for the squad that brought in the prisoners.

Up a long hill they went, and stopped for a moment at the crest. From far behind came the sounds of pursuit.

"We have the speed of them," Don Felipe said, "but we must watch our mounts."

They started on again. Hour after hour they rode, until they were ready to drop from their saddles because of exhaustion. Then came the moon, just as they reached a jumble of hills that sloped toward the distant river.

Once they saw dark specks on the road far behind and knew that the pursuit endured. But they began to feel some measure of safety now. Standon called, and Don Felipe dropped back to him.

"We cannot reach the river before morning, and the women can stand little more of this," he said. "We shall have to find a hiding place before dawn."

"I have been thinking the same, señor. Have you anything to suggest?"

"There are many excellent hiding places in the hills an hour's ride from here. We shall have to turn from the road and let our pursuers go on past us. Then, when night comes again, we'll have to be careful as we make our way to the river. Such a move may put the enemy between us and our destination, but it is the only way. They may creep upon us during the day, and pick us off. The women cannot ride in this manner much longer."

"Will you lead the way, Señor?"

"Gladly!" Standon replied.

Half an hour later he turned from the main road, and the others followed him. They rode up a narrow cañon that was bathed in the moonlight, knowing that they could get at least a mile from the highway before the bandits reached the spot where they had left it. Here the road curved through the hills, and their pursuers could not see a great distance ahead. They would not know that the quarry had left the road.

Standon guided them across a hill, through a mass of brush, and up another cañon. It was almost dawn now. They found a small recess on the side of a hill, with a smaller entrance, where a man could stretch out behind a rock and watch the entire countryside, and there Standon called a halt. There was water for the horses, and good grass, also.

The women were almost exhausted and had to be helped from their saddles. Carlos fixed a place for them to rest, and they curled up on their grassy bed and soon were sleeping. The horses were relieved of saddles and bridles and turned free; Carlos' mule

drank deeply and then began eating grass as though he had not been running half the night.

It was simple now. Standon established himself as a guard, and bade the other men rest. Far in the distance, he saw their pursuers climb a hill and gallop down the other side. He knew that they were safe for a time.

The morning broadened, the sun became terribly hot, Carlos awoke and attended to the horses and his mule, examining them, making sure that they had not suffered from their long gallop. Carlos, Standon thought, would be a valuable man around a ranch.

Standon was dreaming of Bianca, too. By turning his head he could see her sleeping beside her aunt some distance away. Don Felipe was snoring as though there were no such things in all the world as battles and bandits and hard rides.

Soon the little señorita awoke, drank at the spring, and then made her way up beside Standon.

"Have you seen them, señor?" she asked.

"They passed a long time ago," he replied. "And my name is John."

"Oh! Juan?" she said, smiling at him.

"Do you care to call me that?"

"It is a pretty name," she said. "I always did like it."

Standon reached out and took her hand. "When we get safely to my uncle's ranch, and you have seen me in another environment, when you are rested and your nerves are tranquil again, I shall have a question to ask you."



"You may not wish to ask it when you see me in that different environment."

"But I know that I shall want to ask it," he said. "When you are rested and have forgotten these horrors——"

"I had supposed," she interrupted, "that Americans never waited long for anything."

Standon turned quickly and caught the look in her face. And the next moment she was speaking again, in smothered tones: "Señor! Juan! You will set a bad example for Carlos!"

The next they knew, Don Felipe spoke behind them, and they jumped like school children caught in a prank. The sun already was sinking toward the west.

"Señor Standon, this is all very well," Don Felipe said. "I have no objections, and I am sure that Doña Inez will not have. What I am trying to say is that you should have awakened me a long time ago. I did not intend that you should stand guard all day."

"Carlos has been helping me, señor," Standon said.

"I love a liar sometimes! Carlos is stretched beneath a tree sleeping, snoring, and has been for the last two hours or more. Confound it, I get no credit. I have been on guard myself, and you and Bianca did not even know it! Ah, young love! I am no longer young—and I have loved in vain."

"Perhaps not, Don Felipe!" said the voice of Doña Inez close behind him. And now it was time for Standon and Bianca to turn away and pretend to be watching the distance for bandits.

Came the night, and they mounted and made their

way carefully down the slopes and toward the highway. They rode slowly this night, and stopped now and then to listen, for they were afraid some of the bandits were between them and the river. Carlos rode far ahead on his wild mule, as he had during the flight from Chihuahua, alert to catch sight of a foe.

It was dark for a time, and then the moon came up and bathed the country in splendor, making it twice as beautiful as in the daytime. Standon rode close beside Bianca; once he bent over and put an arm around her, and she leaned her head against him. He stooped and brushed her lips with his—their first kiss.

Two hours before dawn, they heard a commotion far in front of them, and stopped and huddled together. They were in the shadows cast by an overhanging ledge of rock.

"Carlos has met them!" Don Felipe whispered.

They could hear voices now.

"Ho, hunchback, what are you doing so far from home?"

"I am an officer," they heard Carlos reply.

"And you trailed your army instead of leading it, eh? That is the way of officers."

"Have you caught anybody?" they heard Carlos asking.

"We have not. Where they went, we do not know. Their horses must have had wings."

"Who was it, señores?" Carlos asked.

"We are not certain, but they were aristocrats, that much we know. And because we have not caught them, Ben Tarker will give us no reward. On the

other hand, he may give us the very devil! Come, hunchback! We'll return."

Huddled beneath the ledge, Standon and Don Felipe wondered how they were to get free of this entanglement. The bandits would have to pass within a few feet of them, and they could not hope to escape unseen. Again they heard the voice of Carlos.

"Is this all of you, señores—five?"

"Si! The others had sense enough to turn back a long time ago," came the answer.

Standon and Don Felipe considered quickly. Five of them, and they were three with Carlos. They whispered to the women to ride close to the ledge and remain there in the darkness, whispered their plan, overrode the objections the women instantly made.

They clasped hands for an instant, took out their automatics, and rode slowly down the highway. And suddenly they spurred their horses, uttered shrill shrieks, and dashed out into the moonlight and straight at Ben Tarker's men, firing as they came.

Carlos, alive to what was happening, caused his wild mule to spring aside. His sword came out, and he threw it with all his strength. The point of it took one of the bandits in the throat.

Standon and Don Felipe had accounted for two others, and for the horse of another. The last man turned and fled, his fellow grasping at a flying stirrup. Standon and Don Felipe sent a leaden hail after them, and called to the women.

"Ha!" Carlos shrieked. "I made use of my sword at last. I shall let it remain there, as a warning to bandits."

Standon dismounted quickly and examined the three men, to find them dead. He ended the pain of the horse on the ground. And then he sprang into the saddle again, and dashed to the señorita's side, and they galloped rapidly down the road, around the base of a hill and up a long slope, Carlos still far ahead guiding and guarding them.

They did not anticipate further trouble now. Soon they would be at the river, and on the other side would be the States. Standon felt his heart glowing, and once more he rode close beside Bianca and drew her to him.

"It is but a little way now," he said.

And then they reached the crest of another hill, and stopped. Below them was a little valley, and in the distance, like a silver ribbon in the moonlight, was the river!

THE END

## TO THE READER

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